

“The Inconvenient Truth about Lawns

How “Green” is your Lawn?”

by Honey Sharp

“In wildness is the preservation of the world”. Henry David Thoreau

For almost a century, Americans have pursued a love affair with their lawns. Unfortunately, such a habit can prove to be very costly. And in more ways than one. Not only do these typically manicured green carpets require high maintenance but, in addition, they impact the environment.

As we know, lawns just keep growing, (think weekly mowings, year after year...); turn an unsightly brown when the sun beats down, (think sprinklers); are prone to compaction (think re-seeding) and invite unpleasant weeds (think herbicides). And unless you’re pushing a rotary mower, forget about exercise.

The more important issue however, is their enormous cost to the environment. For the past few decades, we have seen how synthetic chemicals designed for achieving the “perfect lawn” damage soils, water systems and wreak havoc upon natural habitats to birds and beneficial insects. And of course, young children and pets are also at risk.

The more recent focus on climate change reveals yet another price. It should be no wonder: a staggering, estimated 40 million acres of lawns exist in the US. Factor in power mowers that emit 10–12 times more emissions per hour of operation than a typical auto, and we can begin to grasp how the average American releases, on the whole, a yearly total of 15,000 pounds (or 7.5 tons) of CO₂ into the atmosphere. (See Al Gore’s website: <http://www.climatecrisis.net/takeaction>)

The good news is that awareness and the demand for solutions is growing. When it comes to our beloved lawns, this ranges from the simple and practical to the more “cutting edge” (...). Emerging from an ecological and sustainable paradigm called permaculture (permanent culture), it is based on an integrated approach to the earth. This extends from food production (including agriculture and fishing), agroforestry, community design to landscaping. In our own backyards, drought tolerant xeriscapes, native plant gardens, green roofs and finally, “green” lawns are growing popular.

David Barnett, president of the American Public Garden Association and vice president of the renowned Mount Auburn Cemetery in

Cambridge, Massachusetts is among many in the public garden world that advocates an ecofriendly approach to landscaping. As he stated recently in *The American Gardener* of the American Horticultural Society: “Minimizing lawn care is something home gardeners can appreciate.” To this end, he advocates scaling down on lawns, pulverizing fallen leaves and using dwarf fescue grasses instead of turfgrasses. As a result, “one of the biggest benefits is creative wildlife habitat.” Preserving vernal pools, a breeding ground for the endangered spotted salamander, is one of his many priorities at Mount Auburn.

When it comes to lawns, nonprofit organizations such as SafeLawns.org and commercial ones such as sunlawn.com that manufactures quiet and nonpolluting reel mowers are joining forces. SafeLawns.org is on a national campaign to inform the public about the benefits of organic lawn care. Their mission is to “affect a quantum change in consumer and industry behavior.”

Here in the Northeast, we can also make a difference by improving maintenance practices and approaching landscaping with a less suburban, more naturalistic—and more forgiving attitude.

1) Reducing lawn care:

- Mow high. A 2 –3 inch lawn cuts back on mowing frequency. It also encourages a dense, well-rooted turf that will deter weeds.
- Reduce the size of the lawn by installing hardscapes such as terraces and paths as well as shrubs, trees, perennial and vegetable gardens. Larger mulched areas under trees, important for the health of root systems, will also decrease the lawn.
- Remove small "islands" and narrow grass strips that require complicated mowing and edging. Concentrate on combining the gardens into larger areas while shaping the lawn with curves.
- Avoid all toxic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. Numerous organic alternatives are available such as the pre-emergent corn gluten, applied in spring and early fall, to discourage the spread of weeds.
- Remove weeds manually with one of the many latest tools or simply an old-fashioned screw driver. Also a potent mix of vinegar, clove oil and mineral oil will work. (On the market is a product called BurnOut II. Sounds pretty serious and needs to be carefully “painted” on or it will also kill the surrounding grass.

2) Rethinking the landscape:

- As an alternative to the typical Kentucky bluegrass or bermudagrass, choose low ground-covers such as clover, thyme and, for shady conditions, pachysandra. (Vinca can be invasive, particularly near the woods where it can escape). For a more “grassy” look, consider native grasses such as Little Bluestem or sedges, fescues or the No-Mow seed mix.
- Consider reverting the lawn to a field which requires only a mowing once or twice a year. By abandoning the large lawn—or choosing a smaller one in the first place—you will enjoy a beautiful meadow with value to wildlife such as butterflies, dragonflies and nesting bobolinks and meadowlarks. Important to remember: mow in spring or fall when birds are not nesting.
- Invest in a wildflower prairie. Yes, if done correctly, this is an investment. Not only are we talking about initial time and money but also careful design, planning and maintenance, in the first couple of years. Basically, you must thoroughly remove the existing lawn with a sod-cutter or simply black plastic to smother it. When prepared, broadcast a quality mix of wildflower and grass seed or plugs if it’s a smaller area. Later, monitor for weeds by hand-picking and/or burning. Burning adds fertility to the soil and encourages the development of deep roots.
- For better access to such “wild” landscapes, create swathes of paths. Greater visual interest and mystery is a key to good landscaping.

As William Niering succinctly sums it up (“Easy Lawns”, the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, 1999): “In an industrial world where natural landscapes are constantly disappearing, you have an opportunity to reverse the trend toward homogeneity and monocultures. Rather than relying on fossil fuels and pesticides required for sustaining a manicured lawn, you can create a homeground that blends into the wilderness as a self-perpetuating system fueled by the sun.”

Resources:

Books:

“Easy Lawns”, the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, 1999

“Redesigning the American Lawn” Yale University Press, 1993

Websites:

<http://www.climatecrisis.net/takeaction>

<http://www.cetonline.org/>

<http://www.climatecrisiscoalition.org/>

http://eartheasy.com/grow_lawn_alternatives.htm