

## REDESIGNING THE AMERICAN LAWN

Our perfectly groomed, perpetually green, weed-free lawns, mowed parks and public greens must by now seem so naturally there, so automatically expected, that their absence would come as a deep shock.

Yet modifying and even eliminating our lawns is the central theme of F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmari and Gordon T. Geballe's *Redesigning the American Lawn: a Search for Environmental Harmony* (166 pp., Yale University Press, 1993).

They detail our more than century long love affair with lawns, their vast physical and psychological reach, their economic and environmental costs, and earth friendly alternatives.

Loving lawns is not universal – Americans and Britons are most deeply smitten – though a yearning for our ancient ancestors' grassy, tree-spotted savannahs may be more widespread. Our founding fathers believed, as a democratic standard, that everyone should be able to own a piece of land, and Washington and Jefferson created spacious lawns as models.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century lawn-enfolded detached houses had become an ideal. The lawn became a verdant moat, separating the city from the private house. By the late 1800's setbacks began to be fixed by law, and the lawn became an institution, a symbol of human control of nature.

Go to any corner of our country, from the wet northeast to the dry southwest, and you will find the "industrial lawn" – grass only, weed free, always green, and regularly mowed to an even height – defying geography and climate.

By 1993 it occupied 40,000 square miles, 81% of it home lawns – more than any agricultural crop.

By 1992 62% of U.S. households engaged in lawn care, spending 6.9 billion on their lawns, and creating an industry generating \$25 billion annually. Lawn maintenance cost more per acre than corn, rice or sugarcane. We bought 67 million pounds of herbicides and pesticides. On the east coast, which gets summer rain, 30% of total water went to lawns; in the drier west, 60%. And homeowners used 10 times more fertilizer than farmers.

Our lawns had become chemically addicted. Perfection meant a perpetual round of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, fossil fuels to create these and run lawn machines, and so much water it overflows daily into street drains to create “urban drool.”

By 1993 13 million lawn machines were sold yearly; the mowers alone consumed 580 million gallons of gas. And all of it fed acid rain, smog, destruction of the ozone layer, greenhouse gases, and respiratory problems.

That year every American generated a half ton of solid waste – 160 million tons a year, total, half of it yard waste and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of that, grass clippings. By then most landfills were nearing capacity.

To reverse these unsustainable trends, the authors suggest more natural lawn care practices – solar powered, self-regulating and self-fertilizing. Their principles are, to meet owners’ esthetic, environmental and economic needs; to lessen fossil fuel use; to reduce dependence on chemicals and irrigation, and to increase biological diversity.

Specifically: choose grass suited to your site – drought or shade tolerant, for instance – include nitrogen-fixing

clovers, switch to a push mower, keep the grass cut higher, reduce the number of cuttings, fertilize organically (or leave grass clippings in place), shun toxic sprays, tolerate some weeds and bugs, water deeply but infrequently. Cluster plants with similar water needs, use grey water from showers, sinks and washing machines, install rain catchment, reduce lawn size.

More drastically, they suggest the “freedom lawn” – welcoming without care whatever takes root in your yard and will withstand mowing.

Or replace it with native plants that, once established, will take little or no care. Or with a vegetable garden, or an orchard, a Mediterranean walled garden, or a Japanese garden – the possibilities are endless, and can be beautiful.

And you’ll have the satisfaction of being a good steward of “that piece of the biosphere entrusted to our care.”