THE LAWN GOODBYE
Alternatives to the Traditional Front Lawn

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How could grass be threatening? We play on grass, picnic on grass, and enjoy its fresh green color next to tree trunks and bright flowers. William Wordsworth wrote of "splendor in the grass," and Emily Dickinson described grass that would "hold the Sunshine in its lap . . . and thread the Dews, all night, like pearls." How can so enchanting a thing be dangerous? Actually, grass itself is not bad, but the extent of the suburban landscape of grass lawns in this country and the methods used to maintain these lawns combine to form a serious threat to the environment. While lawns of grass are still preferable to slabs of concrete, the following figures should give us pause:

Lawns occupy more land in the United States than any single crop, and homeowners use 10 times more chemical pesticides per acre than farmers do.[1]

As much as 60 per cent of the water used in Western cities is used on lawns, and a still serious 30 per cent is used in Eastern cities.[2]

Lawn maintenance impacts the environment in other ways as well. Restricting the lawn to a single variety of grass and keeping it clipped short limits the variety of wildlife that can exist within it. Large quantities of petrochemicals are wasted in running lawn maintenance equipment and in manufacturing fertilizers, and gasoline-powered lawn equipment produces significant amounts of air pollution. The removal of grass clippings and leaves deprives lawns of a natural source of nitrogen and needlessly uses up space in garbage landfills. Those of us who are lazy gardeners manage to avoid some of the worst transgressions against the environment through sloth rather than good intentions, but benign neglect seldom pleases the neighbors.

What is the conscientious lawn steward to do? It is impossible to return plots of land to their pristine condition before human intervention. However, the complexities involved in finding a good, balanced alternative for the space between the house and the street border on the vexatious; it can be tempting to give up and return to the simplicity of the turfed lawn. Several writers, including Sarah Stein and Michael Pollan, have recently published helpful works dealing with that confusing, complex, and magical natural world that surrounds our homes, and they tend to suggest that the cutting edge today is anything but.

These slender but estimable volumes might best be consulted while sitting in the midst of your lawn. There, with the lawnmower safely stowed in the garage, you can weigh alternatives while watching weeds, clover, and additional species of grasses sprout naturally in your lawn. To make up for the loss of exercise previously occasioned by mowing, you might ride your bicycle or walk through the surrounding neighborhoods looking for interesting lawn alternatives.

The suburban front lawn, typically a single variety of grass kept uniformly green for as much of the year as human intervention can manage, is a relatively recent and still primarily American phenomenon. Technologically, lawns were not feasible for the middle classes until lawnmowers were developed in the mid-19th century, making lawn maintenance possible without a crew of workmen or flock of sheep. Planned spaces for lawns became commonplace only with the change in housing patterns embodied in the creation and growth of suburbs during the same period. Landscape designers Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted were early proponents of lawns of closely mown turf. Downing's popular books on landscape architecture and domestic architecture always included idyllic illustrations of houses placed on "smiling" lawns, neatly kept and framed by trees.

Open front lawns were seen as an embodiment of the democratic spirit in the 19th century. The author of *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds* (1870) strongly advocated the contiguous, open front lawns that typify so much of the suburban landscape today, declaring that it was "unchristian to hedge from the sight of others the beauties of nature, which it has been our good fortune to create or secure."[3] Today, when we encounter blank cedar fences or brick walls, eight feet tall, right next to the sidewalk, we are all the more likely to appreciate the 19th-century desire to create open, uninterrupted spaces that please the passing public as well as the proud owners.

It is unfortunate and ironic that, through the desire to be surrounded by nature as represented in the idyllic front lawn, we are now endangering the larger natural world. In the 20th century, scientists, marketing experts, and compliant consumers have created a landscape of lawns that require herbicides, insecticides, fertilizers, and frequent mowing. This human desire to force nature into an orderly, "perfect" appearance attained a new level of artifice when California home owners spray-painted their lawns green after six years of drought and strict water

Rolling out a new lawn in southern California.

Bill Owens

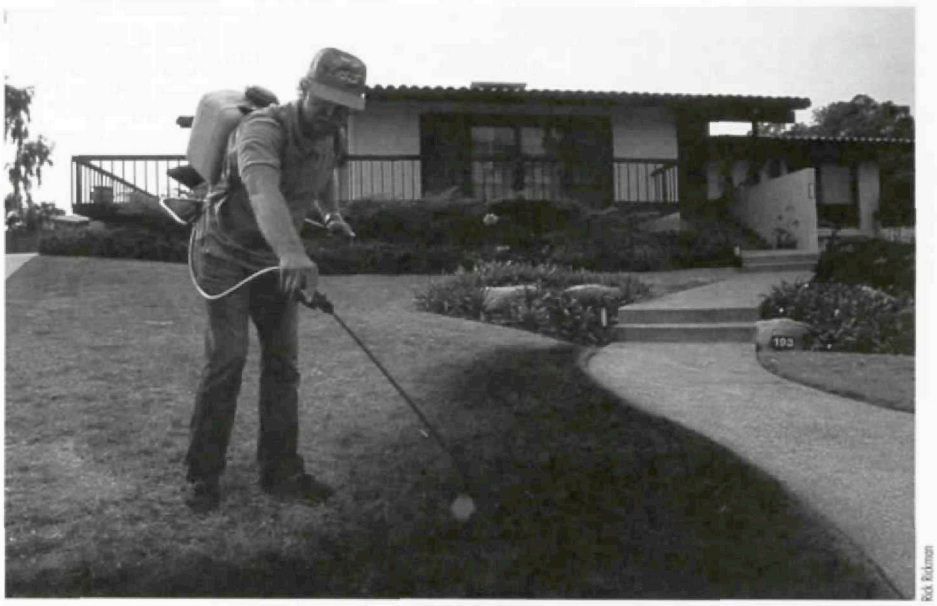
rationing turned the turf brown. When such commitment to an ideal green lawn combines with the inherent suburban tendency toward order and neatness, it is not surprising that homeowners who prefer meadows in front of their houses or who simply hate to mow have been ostracized by their neighbors.

Legal measures have also been used to ensure conformity in lawn care where peer pressure has proven insufficient. Most communities still have regulations outlawing high grass, ostensibly for public safety. High grass is a fire hazard in times of drought, and some of the wildlife that lives in tall grass may carry disease. However, in the interests of a broader public good, the time is at hand for ecologists to work with public health officials to develop new regulations that will allow variety and biodiversity in our yards while still protecting us from genuine dangers. A few communities have already incorporated environmental principles into codes and ordinances that could significantly change the ubiquitous front lawn. Several of the zoning codes created by town-planners Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk restrict planting on private lots to species selected for drought tolerance and suitability as habitats for local fauna.[4] The Texas Legislature even passed an act that mandates phasing in water-efficient landscaping of all state buildings, facilities, roadside parks, and highway plantings over the next five years.

If you are interested in phasing in your own lawn alternative, the sources we present here can provide inspiration and down-to-earth recommendations. As a general rule, increasing variety in your plantings will increase variety in the resultant animal and insect life and decrease overall vulnerability to disease and insect infestation. The use of hardy native species significantly reduces the need for watering and pesticides.

In Houston, Lynn Lowrey and Katie Ferguson devised several outstanding lawn alternatives utilizing native plants. The narrow patch of ground in front of the Southline Equipment Company on Cavalcade Street provided enough space for Lowrey in the early 1970s to plant a jungle of native plants that now almost completely hides the sizable industrial building. In 1980, Charles Tapley and Don Peacock created a small pine forest around the Tanglewood home of Mr. and Mrs. Paul G. Bell, Jr. Its pine trees and native undergrowth provide a dramatic contrast to the neighbors' manicured carpets of green.

If you are not yet ready to start a major native plant showplace, you can still decrease your ecological guilt with almost no effort by growing a Freedom Lawn. The Freedom Lawn is what happens naturally in humid regions when frequent fertilization, applications of pesticides, frequent watering, and rigorous mowing are abandoned.[5] Maverick varieties of grasses and other plants find places within the lawn, and biodiversity increases. You may need to educate your neighbors on the virtues of this alternative, and in Houston you will still need to edge to keep the Saint Augustine grass from taking over sidewalks and driveways.



Rick Rickman

Painting lawns with a biodegradable paint was a solution to the six-year California drought that ended in 1993.

An herbal lawn is a delightful alternative that unfortunately will not flourish in Houston. In more northern climates, perennial or self-seeding herbs can be mixed with cold-season turf grasses to produce fragrant and useful lawns that tolerate regular mowing and foot traffic. The warm-season grasses used for lawns in the South and Texas tend to spread vigorously and overpower herbs.

Lawns of Asiatic jasmine, liriope, monkey grass, and ivy are not uncommon in heavily shaded areas, where traditional turf does not grow well. When several types of groundcover are used, the variety of textures and colors in the different plantings can provide welcome visual relief from traditional turf, and higher growth can provide a habitat for birds and a few more species of wildlife.

If you have sufficient time and money, consider turning your front lawn into a formal garden or a vegetable garden. Even though these appear to be at opposite ends of the gardening spectrum, they are actually very similar when viewed as alternatives to lawns. Both require considerable cultivation, and plants must be changed with the seasons to keep the space continually productive or blooming. However, the visual or edible rewards can be substantial.

Sarah Stein recommends a more radical change in *Noah's Garden.* One of her overriding concerns is the loss of balanced animal and insect life in a suburban landscape dominated by closely mown lawns, so she suggests facilitating the return of wildlife by accommodating the animals' fear of exposure. Instead of having a "blank" lawn with inserted beds and shrubs, she suggests the opposite, a tall growth of grass, shrubs, and groves of trees with paths and clearings inserted. If the tall grass and thickets could connect individual properties, the resulting mosaic ecosystem could reinstate hospitable wildlife habitats.

Environmental concerns are not what usually motivates folk artists to create their own alternatives to front lawns, such as the Orange Show and the Flower House in Houston and Sam Mirelez's miniature architectural wonderland in San Antonio. However, the aesthetic or spiritual benefits of such environments more than compensate for the lack of plant life, particularly since, by their very nature, folk art environments will always be the exception rather than the rule in any neighborhood. These spaces remind us of the importance of variety and creativity in our environment. They also suggest that the uniformity and monotony of the traditional lawn is perhaps worse than the excess of insecticides and petrochemicals used to maintain it.

Interesting alternatives to the traditional front lawn abound, and almost all of them can be maintained in environmentally beneficial ways. Whether it's a simple Freedom Lawn or a jungle of native plants, the kindest cut of all may be to let the grass grow greener on the other side of the plot line.■

1 F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmori, and Gordon T. Geballe, *Redesigning the American Lawn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 68, 97.

2 Ibid., pp. 107–108.

3 Frank J. Scott, *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds* (1870; reprint ed., Watkins Glen, New York: American Life Foundation, [1977]), p. 61.

4 Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, *Towns and Townmaking Principles* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), p. 96.

5 Bormann et al., *Redesigning the Lawn,* p. 97.

6 Sarah Stein, *Noah's Garden: Restoring the*

Lawnchair Reading

Redesigning the American Lawn *by F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmori, and Gordon T. Geballe. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.* A well-organized, straightforward presentation of the traditional lawn's history and environmental impact that also recommends alternatives within the reach of the general reader. Written by a committee and consequently lacking a certain inspirational spark, it provides an excellent overview of our problematic landscape.

Second Nature: A Gardener's Inspiration *by Michael Pollan. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991 (hardcover); New York: Dell, 1992 (paper).* A delightful account of Pollan's experiences with his garden and meditations on the implications of different gardening practices for the world beyond his property.

Noah's Garden: Restoring the Ecology of Our Own Back Yards *by Sara Stein. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.* A beautifully written, careful consideration of the multilayered complexity of trying to restore a traditional lawn and garden to a "natural" state. Stein is particularly interested in wildlife and its relationship to the lawn and landscaping alternatives.

Xeriscape Gardening: Water Conservation for the American Landscape *by Connie Ellefson, Tom Stephens, and Doug Welsh. New York: Macmillan, 1992.* Provides guidelines on creating lush, green landscapes without excessive use of water.

Information packets from the National Wildflower Research Center. A variety of pamphlets and information sheets are available from the National Wildflower Research Center on subjects including gardening and landscaping with native plants, wildflower-meadow gardening, and recommended species and sources for specific geographic areas. Call (512) 929-3600 for information.

Native Plant Society of Texas News, P.O. Box 891, Georgetown, TX 78627. (512) 863-9685. Six issues annually.

"Herbal Lawns" by Rita Buchanan. *The Herb Companion,* June/July 1993, pp. 22–28.