

# Selections from **The American Obsession with Lawns**

By Krystal D'Costa on May 3, 2017 - Scientific American



Warmer weather in the northern states means more time outside, and more time to garden. While urban gardeners may be planning their container gardens, in the suburbs, homeowners are thinking about their lawns. It's the time of year when the buzz of landscaping equipment begins to fill the air, and people begin to scrutinize their curb appeal. The goal is to attain a patch of green grass of a singular type with no weeds that is attached to your home. It must be watered, mowed, repaired, and cultivated. Lawns are expensive—and some regard them as boring in their uniformity—but they are a hallmark of homeownership. Why do Americans place so much importance on lawn maintenance?

Lawns are a recent development in the human history of altering our environment. The landscape that greeted the early European colonists in America had already been greatly altered by Native Americans for the purposes of hunting and fishing. These first colonists found no pasture grasses as these were not native to the eastern seaboard. In New England, the grasses were mostly annuals, like broomstraw, wild rye, and marsh grass, and had a lower nutritional value than the grasses of northwest Europe. Livestock are not particularly picky when it's time to eat, though, and as European cattle, sheep, and goats spread throughout the east coast, these native grasses disappeared. Once those grasses were gone, many animals died following those first winters from starvation or from eating poisonous plants in desperation. This created a rather stark landscape which was not conducive to raising animals, a chief concern for survival at the time. So as a part of their supply lists, settlers in the 17th-century requested grass and clover seeds. The supply ships brought more than “good” grasses, however. At the ports, the dump site for ships introduced weeds, like dandelions and plantains, from bedding, fodder, and manure. By 1672 twenty-two European species of weeds had taken up residence around Massachusetts Bay. These foreign grasses quickly spread across the continent—they may have initially been immigrants in their own right but within a few generations, they were definitely naturalized American citizens. In the west, grasses that originated in the Mediterranean took root as Spanish soldiers and missionaries settled there. All of this meant that by the 18th-century, farmers had a selection of naturalized grasses to choose from and very few were cultivating their own grasses. But as animals overgrazed their pastures, their fields were consumed by briars and bushes. The market was ripe for grass seed once again, and several seed houses and nurseries were established in Philadelphia. By the 19th-century, grass was agricultural crop, making it available for residential purposes. Against this timeline and given the priorities of American colonists, it is no coincidence then that before the Civil War front lawns were uncommon. Where they did exist, they were somewhat an experiment by the wealthy in a new style of landscaping.

Today, there is a significant industry that exists around lawn care and management. From equipment to chemicals to seed, lawns require knowledge, time, and money. The transition to a more public placement of lawns is tied to three major developments in the rise of the American suburbs:

1. The public park movement championed by Frederick Law Olmsted, which greatly influenced the first suburban communities on the East Coast. These communities were often modeled after parks with a communal green and additional green spaces, and often included the word “Park” in their name.
2. The adoption of automobiles and the rise of long distance travel by train in the 1920s pressured homeowners to beautify the fronts of their homes for the sake of passersby. Houses were intentionally built facing the rail line to enhance the scenery and experience for travelers.

3. Following WWII, the federal government financed low-cost mortgages, which propelled builders to create blue-collar tract housing. These establishments often featured lawns in an attempt to mimic upper middle class suburban development and attract residents.

But even in the wake of these developments, it's important to note that lawns were still restricted to those with economic means. Most Americans in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries (urban factory workers, southern tenant farmers, and sharecroppers) had no front yard. And even among those with money, many still subscribed to the English Garden aesthetic as that had already been established, and did not have the means to undertake sweeping landscape changes. Following the Civil War and toward the end of the 19th-century, however, the Northern states entered into a period of growth following the Civil War. Railroad tycoons and factory owners saw their investments and businesses grow, and as such, they looked to accumulate material symbols to signify their prosperity. The front lawn became an exhibit space. The rise of printed gardening advice enforced this position. It became a part of regular news circulation—newspapers covered lawn care and flower cultivation in an effort to boost circulation—and consequently, everyday conversations. The awareness of lawns and their significance was made into an everyday occurrence. It was still an exercise in wealth, however. Lawn grass was not easy to grow. (It's not easy today, either.) Pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers were virtually unknown until recently. And when lawns were patchy or failed to grow, homeowners were advised to rip it up and start over. The rise in economic opportunities meant that homeowners who were inclined to pursue a green carpet of grass could hire someone to attend to its needs—another indicator of success. Their leisure time would not be consumed by the maintenance work required for the lawn.

The sheer volume of resources required to keep lawns alive is staggering. And seems particularly wasteful in consideration of drought plagued places, like California. The significance of lawns persisted in the west for a long time, and was aided by water management technologies that helped transform arid landscapes into lush ones. But that is changing as well, perhaps in part due to the awareness made possible by social media. Lawns require the equivalent of 200 gallons of drinking water per person per day. Californians, who are acutely aware of this wastage, have taken to shaming neighbors who persist in watering their lawns.

We are at a moment when the American Dream, inasmuch as it still exists, is changing. The idea of homeownership is untenable or undesirable for many. While green spaces are important, a large area of green grass seems to be a lower priority for many. With a growing movement that embraces a more natural lifestyle, there is a trend toward the return of naturalized lawns that welcome flowering weeds, and subsequently support a more diverse entomological ecosystem. Old habits die hard, however. And it is hard to also abandon this idea of a manifestation of material success, especially as it is so readily recognized as such. Lawns are the most grown crop in the United States--and it's not one that anyone can eat; its primary purpose is to make us look and feel good about ourselves. Americans have taken their landscape aesthetic around the world. American communities in Saudi Arabia have lawns in the middle of the desert. American embassies and consulates around the world have lawns. And when the Cultural Revolution swept through China, any lawns that had been established under American and British influence were pulled out. Lawns are American. But they're also an anomaly. And they may no longer fit the realities of the world we live in.

#### **Article Questions:**

1. Why were invasive grasses first introduced into the United States?
2. How were the first suburban communities designed?
3. How did the increase in automobile use lead to the rise of suburban lifestyle?
4. What role did the end of World War II have in the development of suburbs?
5. What are sources of backlash against lawns and lawncare?
6. Analyze the quote "Lawns are the most grown crop in the United States--and it's not one that anyone can eat; its primary purpose is to make us look and feel good about ourselves." Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?