

The American Lawn: a Product in Search of a Need

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Americans 'farm' 40,000,000 acres of lawn. That's an area the size of Ol' Virginny (modern Virginia and West Virginia). Lawn is the largest 'crop' in the State of Maryland. Fairfax County lawn farmers buy more nitrogen than farmers in any other county of the Commonwealth. How did the great American lawn become such a fixture in today's society?

Lawn care – mowing, weeding, seeding, raking, fertilizing, edging, watering – takes a lot of time and money. Can you imagine the American middle class homeowner, having achieved a 40 hour work week, a single family detached home, and financial security, saying “What I need is something to use most of my free time when the weather is nice and much of my disposable income to feel complete?” If they did, they already had golf, so why would they need a lawn? The fact that many successful businesses exist to provide lawn care to suburbanites, suggests that lots of homeowners view lawn care as a chore and a burden, rather than a delight.

What is the origin of the suburban lawn? Many people think it goes back to the days when the minute men would muster on the village 'green' to drill and shoot redcoats. Not so. Those village squares did not become 'greens' until the latter 19th century. Lawns first arose in 18th century landscaping around European palaces. They provided places to stroll and see and be seen; and good visibility and fields of fire when the local peasants visited to 'talk' about income redistribution and land equity.

American landscape planners like Fredrick Law Olmstead borrowed the lawn for large public landscapes like Central Park and the private landscapes of wealthy robber barons. With these large public and estate lawns came the birth of the lawn care industry. Lawns were originally cut by hand with a scythe, so some enterprising individuals adapted agricultural machinery to cut the finer blades of grass and gave birth to the lawn mower. The turf grasses imported from England and northern Europe (yes, all turf grasses, even Kentucky bluegrass is from Europe or Asia) did not do well in our climate, particularly summer, so some tried to improve those grasses and gave birth to the lawn seed industry.

The problem was that with lawns restricted to large public and estate spaces, the lawn care industry didn't have much of a market. To make a go of it the early lawn mower and seed manufacturers had to expand their market. Fortunately for them the suburbs were starting to expand and the Garden Clubs of America decided that suburban home gardens should be downsized versions of estate gardens. And so a beautiful friendship was formed. Together, the young lawn care industry and the Garden Clubs of America, with a little help from Madison Avenue, convinced suburban homeowners that the thing they needed to be complete was a lawn.

The modern American lawn really took root and grew in the new mass produced subdivisions after World War II. Levittown, the original post war subdivision, was built on an old potato farm on Long Island. Grass was the cheapest way to cover the acres of potato field not covered by streets and houses; each home also got 4 fruit trees. The petroleum and chemical industries also developed and expanded during the war and now turned to providing the new suburban class with tools to grow green, weed free lawns. Homeowners began throwing time, money, fertilizer, weed killer, seed and water at their lawns in a vain attempt to get their turf grass to be green and luxuriant all year long. Nobody told them that turf grass has an admirable life strategy of working hard and growing vigorously during the cool months of Spring and Fall and vacationing during the hot summer and cold winter months. Who needed to play golf (or had the time to), when they had a fairway in their front yard?

What does a lawn do for you? It does smell great when it is freshly cut, if you ignore the fact that one of the chemicals in that scent is the active ingredient in rat poison. (No, smelling it won't hurt you, just don't eat the green clippings.) It is a great place to play or snooze in the sun, if you have time to play or snooze after pampering your lawn. It is great habitat for Japanese beetles. Wait what? Yes, one of the many grubs that feed on your grass roots are Japanese beetle larvae, who after munching on your grass roots emerge as adults and eat, well pretty much everything. The truth of the matter is that the chemically addicted, over-pampered modern American lawn is a biological desert and serves very little purpose in the suburban landscape other than to sooth the ego of the modern American lawn farmer. If you don't believe me, think about some of the lawn care commercials you have seen – "you don't want to be 'that guy' do you?". Fortunately there is a better way to take care of your lawn.

Next up: What's Killing Your Lawn?