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Dawn of the Lawn

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Dawn of the Lawn

My quest to find answers regarding the American lawn grew out of relatively humble circumstances. Similar to many other adolescents who do not have a full time job, I have found myself from time to time seeking odd jobs here and there – anything I could do to provide some extra spending cash. These jobs could encompass several things from wood working, helping a friend move, to what many have found to be a practical source of income – yardwork. Now, while this word may send a shiver up the majority of mankind’s spine, I find this activity to be an effective avenue to get outside, stay active, and make money. The thought came to me one day while I was mowing a client’s lawn: why is someone paying me a fair amount of money to cut this little green plant which will be the same height in a week? Have lawns always been in America? Why do individuals care so deeply about their lawns? Hiding from no one, the trim, green lawn hosts parks, weddings, golf, football, and many other cherished elements of American’s lives. The lawn can be found from the skirts of interstates to the foot of the White House, yet discussion remains absent as to the lawn’s intricate footprint in this country. As it is surrounded by criticism and the firm grip of American culture, the lawn along with its cultural, economic, and environmental impact must begin to be addressed with reasonable discussion and the consideration of viable lawn alternatives that satisfy a larger dynamic of individuals.

The majority of environmental and sustainability scholars are focused on a very specific lawn. Herbert Bormann, in his essay, “Rethinking the American Lawn,” coins this lawn as the “industrial lawn”, which is encapsulated by these criteria: “1. It is composed of grass species only. 2. It is free of weeds and other pests. 3. Insofar as possible it is continuously green. 4. It is regularly mowed to a low, even height” (2). This is the lawn, aided by a history of cultural support, mechanical and scientific advancements, and the lawn industry that many citizens have

come to know and love. Elaborating further, Yaoqi Zhang et al. outline the historical crux of the industrial lawn's rise to fame in his article, "The American Lawn Revisited: Awareness Education and Culture as Public Policies Toward Sustainable Lawn." Although people would not have frequently or normally used the word "lawn" until post-Civil War times, the notion of including a low-sheared lawn on one's property originally arose in the early seventeenth century out of England (109). Foreseeably, the colonization of America carried this landscape preference with it, yet an interesting and rather surprising shift took place. Zhang et al. argue, "Unlike the traditional English garden, in which lawns usually served as a setting for lawn games and as a backdrop for flower beds and trees, the American lawn has become the dominant theme in American Gardens," and now, "nowhere in the world are lawns as prized as they are in the US" (109).

The lawn replaced the garden as the centerpiece of one's property. This inversion marked the birth signs of the rigid and pressured ideal that penetrates our culture today. The energetic belief that a nurtured and cultivated lawn correlates to an individual's ethos, mainly that of high esteem, was seemingly influenced by the wealthy and renowned, as many individuals such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson adopted the lawn for themselves (109). The lawn then slowly elevated itself among the American people, both poor and rich, to a place of social status and righteous obligation. Recognizing this correlation, Frederick Law Olmsted, the brilliant father of the first suburb *Riverside* located in Illinois, established a park-like lawn housing community, each house having lawns that were viewed as a shared investment. Following this ideology, it then developed that aesthetic appeal of the lawn was directly proportionate to the desirableness and value of the neighborhood (Zhang et al. 109-111). If each landowner did his or her "part," then everything proceeded splendidly; that is, *if* they did their part. Understanding

that their money was on the line, the owners and managers of these suburbs formed community associations. These associations that go hand in hand with suburbia manufactured regulations and ensured its people towed the line (Zhang et al. 110). As one can now imagine, this cultural trait has, by the way of time, become thoroughly woven into our society and is now represented monetarily by a multimillion-dollar industry. Money is only one of the reasons that the Industrial lawn and more generally grass is pertinent to the American's life.

The industrial lawn can further impact our lives through the use of oil, fertilizers, pesticides, and clean water. Interestingly, this lawn's standards are nearly identical throughout the United States, yet we know the same species do not normally grow in the many diverse climates of the U.S. Bormann warns that when we attempt to apply and maintain this rigid ideal in adverse regions where grass does not grow natively, dilemmas are inherently created, for this inflexible criterion undoubtedly falls short at accommodating the variety of ecosystems across the continent (3). While debate still remains as to the existence or severity of these "dilemmas," several scientific communities hold concerns about the lawn's contribution to the environment. Theodore Steinberg contends in his book *American Green: the Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* that playing a significant part in the annual 40 billion dollar and 40 million acre industry, lawn fertilizers and pesticides seem to be conjoined with achieving a standard, which Steinberg calls an unattainable fantasy founded on oil and water (4, 14). These words and many others invoke an intriguing dialogue that must be tested for authenticity and relevance.

Cars, trains, aircraft, and machinery of all kinds consume oil as they facilitate daily life, and the lawn industry is no exception. To begin, an industrial lawn must be frequently mowed; typically, this is achieved using small engine lawn equipment. Although it would not be considered to be the most serious offender, Yale University academician Herbert Bormann,

Diana Balmori, and Gordon Geballe contend in their book *Redesigning the American Lawn: A Search for Environmental Harmony*, that the industrial lawn, followed by other standards and elements of grass landscaping, surely consumes a notable share of fossil fuels (96). While seemingly minor compared to automobiles, the annual 580 million gallons of fuel required to maintain one's lawn via small engines can hold larger environmental implications (Bormann, et al. 96). In the state of California, for instance, the yearly use of small engine lawn care equipment can rival the contamination inputs of driving "3.5 million 1991 model automobiles driven 16,000 miles each" (Bormann, et al. 92, 96). While this correlation is unmistakably changing proportions due to the modern engine regulations and technological advancements that are in effect, this fact at minimum urges the reader to reevaluate the implications of small engine use to a greater extent. These authors additionally question the use of fertilizers and chemicals on lawns.

While fertilizers and various chemicals may proficiently achieve a desired goal, Bormann, Balmori, and Geballe feel that the use of these chemicals leads to unintended side effects that may be expressed through a variety of channels (98). Over-fertilization can actually work against the plush green lawn pictured on the bag, weakening the plant's ability to survive in less than ideal conditions and to fight off infections (Bormann, et al. 98). In his book *Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are*, Paul Robbins, director of the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explores this issue in depth. Robbins holds that while the fertilizers may not be seen as a direct threat to people, they have been shown to make their mark on ecology. It may be more comfortable to assume that the chemicals owners apply to their lawns stay put; however, research show that these chemicals, such as fertilizers, are making their way into our oceans and streams (Robbins

64). Provided with an abundance of nutrients, algae and other micro aquatic life flourishes in these environments only to die shortly later, having robbed the water of the oxygen that fish and other mammals require for survival (Robbins 64). These preventable disruptions arise due to an excessive use of these substances that operates from a “the more the better” mindset. However, while fertilizers may present only weak threat, many scholars would have one believe that the risks of pesticides lie in a whole new league of danger.

Many individuals assert that chemicals can lead to more harm than good. Robbins contends that lawn insecticides and pesticides can directly affect people and pets and do not genuinely solve the problem. Robbins calls the latter phenomena a ‘chemical treadmill.’ This occurs in which the chemical user, by eliminating only a fraction of the true issue, pulls out a chair for another headache to have a seat. This means as Bormann, Balmori, and Geballe argue that pesticides can eliminate both harmful and beneficial organisms together, creating “footholds” for other once preyed upon pests to increase in numbers, and can remain a threat to animals, people, and water supplies long after application (100). For example, if by fighting off one pest (which will possibly become immune to the chemical eventually), one could inadvertently maim the earthworm population, thereby resulting in a less healthy lawn in need of still further correction (67 Robbins). Delving further into the issue, Steinberg suggests that a portion of danger involving lawn chemicals lies in the unknown factor, saying that these substances are often inadequately tested, regulated, and explained to the consumer public. Unlike prescription medication drugs that are rigorously analyzed, lawn chemicals that are tested by the EPA on a simple cost benefit basis are not tested in conjunction with other substances, thereby ignoring the risk of compound effects (Steinberg 121). Compounds that have been outlawed for use in agriculture, one member being mecoprop (MCPP) that have been associated with non-

Hodgkin's lymphoma, remain fair game for lawn use (Steinberg 122). Do we really want our families, pets, and wildlife exposed to these substances? Allowing, it is possible that the reader feels that by following the instructions listed harm can be avoided—that is if one can understand them. Starting by girding one's self with reliable spectacles, Steinberg jests that one can now proceed to study the humdrum, uninformative, vague, and poorly designed packaging and micro typeface, attempting to comprehend the material (128). While it is debatable as to the number of people being seriously affected by these chemicals, the subject of clean drinking water has recently become an increasingly spirited exchange, and for good reason.

Southwestern states are currently becoming increasingly concerned with the reality of the need to wisely conserve fresh drinking water. Underlining this point, Bormann, Balmori, and Geballe warn, "We are a nation whose water needs are rapidly rising while available supplies are shrinking and where regional water crises are becoming increasingly frequent" (105). The line must be drawn, as our lawns both consume water and possibly pollute our fresh water with chemicals. Of course, one's disquietude over this issue varies radically by location, for an individual from San Francisco would hold a drastically contrasting response than an individual from Georgia. In their article, "The rise and fall of the American lawn, at least in California," Sarah Kaplan and Nick Kirkpatrick discuss the cultural shift occurring most prominently in California, where lawns are going gold. California Mayer, Jerry Brown, is leading the charge to stop America's grass from competing with the precious clean, drinking water that California desperately needs. The authors quote the governor's startling words: "'The idea of your nice little green grass getting lots of water every day — that's going to be a thing of the past.'" Some Americans have decided that if maintaining a "perfect lawn" competes for individual's drinking water, preventive changes must be enacted.

Drawing collectively from these author's ideas, it would seem as though the lawn is a destructive menace in need of eradication, but is this a reasonable and viable conclusion? There is certainly a great deal of truth in each of these writer's arguments, many of which I appreciate and concur. Yet, upon further examination, one can arrive at a balanced perception of the lawn's effect on the environment.

Extreme cases of lawn care obsession are often cited, leaving out the majority of households who do not apply lawn chemicals at all or in excess. This leaves one's imagination to conjure up an image of the deluge of chemicals and pollution that *must* be destroying our world. However, for the sake of argument, extremes will be met with extremes. Meet Allyn Hane: the Lawn Care Nut. Discussing a section of the process that goes into achieving an amazing lawn, Hane explains in his video, "Lawn Treatment Program Step 2 :: 3 Way Application," how by employing natural and organic fertilizers one can get spectacular results and simultaneously build up the health of the soil. Organics are extremely valuable as they target the soil and not the grass. He warns that the use of synthetics overlooks the fact that a healthy and organism rich soil equates to a healthy green lawn. In addition to smart fertilizer use, Hane remains extremely cautious when employing weed control, as he exclaims there is "no need to apply chemicals in places where we don't need them." Instead of treating the entire lawn, spot control can be used to accurately target offending weeds. Hane, having an extreme case of lawn obsession and a truly remarkable lawn, still exhibits a variety of practical cautions aimed at minimizing detrimental ecological impact. Hane's lawn holds revolutionary implications as the average researching individual has been inundated with the view that the industrial lawn is by definition opposing, and while the industrial lawn undeniably holds ecological implications, logical judgment avoids a majority of negative environmental complications. It can be observed how these once

impassible “objections” begin to dilute into –well, simply not being so objectionable. If one can achieve an industrial lawn with prudence, alternative landscaping that does not strictly appeal to the rigorous industrial lawn standards can then be thought to assume a drastically smaller footprint. To the encouragement of many, there remains a multitude of alternatives to appease the concern over the environment.

When seeking to implement a landscape that compromises or deviates from the industrial lawn status quo, Bormann recommends choosing to maintain a lawn that suits your needs (4-5). For example, if barbeques, backyard sports, and games of tag are part of an individual’s lifestyle, choosing to plant pine trees would be a miserable choice for obvious reasons and unlikely to succeed. Bormann, Balmori, and Geballe provide valuable recommendations aimed at harmonizing one’s lawn with nature, all relative to meeting the needs and satisfaction of the owner (121). Choosing climate specific grasses and shrubbery to adorn one’s property will greatly reduce the need of extra accommodations (125). Reducing or eliminating the use of gasoline powered lawn machinery will help conserve fossil fuels and diminish pollution (128-129). Allowing the cut grass to remain on the lawn will reduce the need for fertilizers—ideally organic fertilizers, and using natural means such as nematodes or milky spore disease to fight pests will allow poisonous pesticides to be left out of the picture (Bormann, et al. 129-131). Among numerous other members, these suggestions remain as viable options to creating a landscape that holds the owner’s interest of a healthy and eco-friendly lawn in mind. However, changes in landscape that run contrary to the societal normal may be met with negative opposition.

In his article, “I Fought the Lawn and the Lawn Won,” Stephen Williams describes a story of a man named Stephen Kenny who lived with his family in a small village outside of

Buffalo, New York. Everything was going well until one day he decided with no harm in mind to make a change. Instead of favoring along a small diseased patch of what might be described as grass, he made the decision to replace his landscape with local field blossoms (Williams). While one may not consider this act to amount to any significance, Kenny's neighbors interpreted this decision as a full-blown war offense, responding by scalping the flowers, shooting his wildlife, penalizing him large sums, and running him out of the neighborhood (Williams). Unfortunately, Stephen Kenney is no fairytale. Words such as death, imprisonment, and harassment have all literally and too often been associated with consternation over grass. In light of these truths, caution, and the expectation of backlash would do well to accompany actions that may seek to alter one's lawn, as this issue is predicted to only continue to increase in volume.

Although scholars are largely still unsure as to why people become deeply invested in their lawn, some individuals such as Robbins have presented theories as to why humans spend so much money, time, and effort on trying to live up to this industrial lawn standard. Robbins, a staunch believer in the hazardous of the lawn, begins by introducing the complexity of the problem. Some voices such as Zhang et al. tout education as the way to ebb the advance of chemical use and change culture in the process, assuming that individuals will not ignore the risks (113). However, Robbins declares that his research shows, contrary to popular belief that, "What is perhaps most remarkable is that people who use chemicals on their lawn tend to be more likely to believe that lawn care has a negative effect on local water quality than people who do not...those who do not claim lawn chemicals as a problem are actually less likely to use them!" (2). A conundrum of this nature would indicate that the solution is not to be reached by an increase of knowledge. Robbins then subtly begs the question: why would highly intelligent, wealthy, educated, and socially aware individuals, despite what one would predict, buy in to such

a system? Robbins suggests that a major factor could lie in these people's awareness of the invisible yet certainly alive righteous moral obligation to maintain a lawn as a piece of one's community (110). As the lawn is understood to reflect the character and monetary value of a neighborhood, this could possibly make it clear why these people would choose to keep an environmentally harmful landscape: the possible fraction of harmful inputs falls to the wayside of the need to "not step on anyone's toes" and to uphold unity. Still others hold that pride is what plays the vital role in supplying lifeblood to the American lawn. This is a plausible suggestion as the phrase, "American Pride," although once commonly associated with the excellence, hard work, and sacrifice that went hand in hand with American citizenship, may describe all too well the gaze of the modern American. While they are not the final, conclusive say on the issue and many other possibilities and objections remain, these proposals show a sliver of this intricate and ongoing conversation.

After weighing the voices and arguments of the current leading researchers on the American lawn, individuals must engage in a culture wide discussion to further refine and develop a balanced understanding and application of the lawn in America. The multitude of issues involving grass such as the drought in California, the imperative to wisely use fertilizers and pesticides, and the occasional vicious social pressures that arise, show that the lawn deserves real-estate in every American's mind. At this point in the ongoing dialogue, implications suggest that one can freely own and maintain an ecologically beneficial landscape that fits their needs, and should one desire, the American industrial lawn is still up for grabs, able to be strategically achieved with minute harmful environmental impact. It will be fascinating to observe Americans and their lawns in years to come. With the many other alternative landscapes entering the

modern scene, we may one day have to discard the phrase, “the grass is always greener on the other side.”

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