



Lose Some Lawn

Here we are in June, the month of weddings, roses...and mowing the lawn. Have you ever wondered why we expend so much time and energy encouraging grass to grow, just so we can cut it short again? The answer lies in the long and storied history of Keeping Up with the Joneses: Once upon a time, in ye merry olde England, lords and ladies surrounded their manors with acres of lush green lawn. They, unlike the peasants, were able to do this because they, unlike the peasants, had flocks of sheep to keep the grass clipped short. And so a lawn became a status symbol, and the peasants dreamed of the day when they could imitate the wealthy.

The dream got a big boost from a nineteenth-century landscape architect named Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of many famous spaces, including Central Park in Manhattan. You may have heard of it. He had a Big Idea that, if everyone in the newly evolving American suburbs had a front lawn, without the fences that enclosed most European properties, the effect would be of one large, continuous, park-like space.

And so, a century or so later, we have expansive lawns, still mown by sheep, except these sheep now ride around on noisy, dirty machines, and most of us never set foot in our front yards except to trim around the edges where the lawnmower blades can't reach. Turns out, people don't really want to conduct their private lives in a public space.

And to what end? For the birds, bees, insects, and wildlife, it's a green desert, devoid of variety, with no grain or seeds, no flowering plants, no nectar, no cover. Any poisons you spread, hoping to rid your space of interlopers like violets and dandelions (which, by the way, were purposely brought to our country as valued plants for use in salads and to make wine or medicines), put at risk the wellbeing of your children, your pets, and yourself. And the planet, which has breathed more freely in the months of lockdown, must groan in disappointment at the renewed assault of fossil fuels.

So, is it time to rethink lawn? One popular alternative is the edible landscape. Many plants we grow for food are surprisingly attractive, entirely worthy of a front bed or border. Planting to feed wildlife also will lead you to a host of beautiful native plants, from trees and shrubs to flowers and groundcovers, with the added advantage that, since they're native, they're usually easier to grow.

A meadow, perhaps? I have quite a lot of lawn, and this year I'm taking the plunge, leaving about half of it uncut. I'm not under any illusions that letting it grow, without doing anything else, will result in a field of wildflowers by midsummer. I'll have to slowly cut out or smother the sod in order to give my native seedlings a fighting chance. It's a long term project. Even so, there is already beauty in the longer grasses rippling in the wind, and in the sprinkling of dandelions, buttercups, violets and tiny unknown blossoms. And the bees are already finding their way to them. Eventually I hope to have only as much lawn as I can manage with a human-powered reel mower (and does anybody in town know how to sharpen mine?). You might not want to go that far, but be brave. You don't have to do it all at once; just stop mowing one or two passes short and see what happens.

But, but, lawns are *pretty*. Well yes, they are—but only because we're trained to think so. A story: until a few years ago my parents lived in a huge Florida retirement community. I was appalled to learn that, in a state that has sunshine 350 days of the year, they were not allowed to hang laundry outdoors. My dad agreed, absolutely, it made no sense, environmentally speaking—but added, "And then the whole neighborhood will look shabby." To my eyes, laundry waving in the sun meant smart, clean energy, but to my parents' generation, it was a reminder of the tenement slums their own parents had worked so hard to escape. Knowing a better way is not the same as feeling it. We have to retrain our eyes, and redefine our idea of what is beautiful.

It's not as hard as you think: just go back and look at your style choices for your high school yearbook photo. Change for the better!