

Making your lawn more sustainable

It's not hard to see that we love big green lawns. In our part of the Midwest we are literally surrounded by turf grass. A well kept lawn seems to fit somewhere between cleanliness and godliness in our culture but this may not be very good for the future of the planet.

The love of lawns seems to date back to Renaissance Europe when only the wealthy could afford grounds keepers to maintain the fine bladed grass plants. It wasn't until the industrial revolution that lawns became practical for most Americans. Green, weed-free lawns, so common today, didn't exist in America until the late 18th century. Instead, the area just outside the front door of a typical rural home was typically packed dirt or perhaps a cottage garden that contained a mix of flowers, herbs, and vegetables.

Between 1915 and 1930 the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Golf Association collaborated on developing grass species that would produce the uniform turf that we see in the front-yards of America today. Unfortunately these species don't do very well on their own as they are not native and need fertilizer, herbicides, water and lots of mowing to maintain that well groomed look.

These grass plants are rather unique. Most plants grow at the tip and usually die if continually mowed. These horticulturally developed grass species grow from the base of the plant and can have their tops continuously cut-off. This need of mowing has become a problem.

The EPA estimates that every weekend 54 million homeowners fire up their lawn mower and are burning about 800 million gallons of gasoline annually. As lawnmowers have no pollution control equipment, lawnmowers produce about 5% of our nation's air pollution. Currently with our cleaner cars, one lawnmower produces annually as much air pollution as 43 passenger cars!

As we each try to reduce our personal impact on the planet and lower our carbon footprint can we still have a thick green lawn? As with most things in life, moderation is a good first step. Here's a few questions to consider when dealing with your infatuation for turf.

1. Can you reduce the area you mow? There are many low growing or no-mow grass species available. You also may consider expanding perennial gardens or plantings of native species to reduce the area that requires mowing.
2. Can you reduce the amount of fertilizer and other chemicals you are using to make your lawn grow faster? Can you use organic fertilizers and herbicides to reduce your downstream impacts on the water bodies that receive your run-off? Can you leave the clippings in place to build up the soil and reduce your contribution to land fills?
3. Can you reduce the amount of air pollution that you create by using a manual push mower? You can get some exercise while mowing and reduce the nation's air pollution. The new crop of push mowers look very light and efficient. They also probably cost less than a membership at the gym.

Good luck in making the maintenance of your twenty first century lawn more sustainable.

Randy Lueth, ASLA is a consulting Registered Landscape Architect and a member of the Sustainable Marshfield Committee. You can contact him at RLueth@RL-LA.com

