

# TURF WARS

The Battle Over the American Lawn

by Evan Ratliff photos Todd Hido



The dream of this continent is expressed in lawns.

—Michael Dean, *In Search of the Perfect Lawn*

**Frank Rudisill is deeply devoted to his lawn.**

From March to December, the 41-year-old financial planner spends six to eight hours a week in his yard, in Galloway, New Jersey, happily engaged in the rituals of landscape maintenance: mowing, weeding, fertilizing, edging, watering. This summer, though, a crisis plagues the lawns of the Garden State: Drought conditions have triggered mandatory water use restrictions.

Rudisill is unconcerned. He has a secret weapon in his quest for yard care perfection, despite the state's imposition of austere water restrictions. For the past few years, Rudisill has used green lawn dye to transform unsightly brown patches to a lush green. "It's a bit like playing God," he says.

Pin him to the compulsive end of the lawn care curve, but Rudisill is far from alone. According to the National Gardening Association, 60 million Americans, more than half the nation's households, engage in some form of do-it-yourself gardening or lawn care; 26 million more spend a combined \$17 billion a year hiring professionals to seed, fertilize, and mow their lawns for them. The land mass occupied by American lawns totals more than 25 million acres, an area about the size of Virginia. In the gallery of national icons, lawn care is as all-American as baseball (a pastime which, not coincidentally, also requires a lot of mulching and mowing).

Yet, over the past two decades, the American lawn has become a battleground in a struggle between legions of green grass enthusiasts, like Rudisill, and a small but fervent army of alternative lawn activists. From regional drought restrictions that limit watering to early morning hours, to exacting "weed laws," to the prohibiting of turf altogether, the lawn has become politicized like never before. The age old

man-conquers-nature instinct that spirits the pursuit of perfectly groomed, close-cropped grass is precisely what rankles its opponents. It's a turf war pitting neighbor against neighbor and threatening to uproot the tranquil symbolism of the American lawn.

**"I hate lawns,"** says **Sandra Walk**, an Ithaca, New York, landscape architect who refuses to install turf and works in native plants. "I want to get rid of them. It's an unnatural monoculture, a contrived aesthetic, and people are absolutely neurotic about it. Lawns are

regulate maximum grass heights and acceptable weed levels. In San Jose, California, a recently passed "blight ordinance" outlaws homeowner landscapes that are left undeveloped or untended. In some municipalities, a perpetually unkempt lawn can result in thousands of dollars in fines.

It's a steep price to pay for forgetting to mow, but turf defenders believe the integrity of the American lawn should be preserved at all costs. You'll hear no argument from big-box retailers, such as Lowe's, that count lawn care products among their biggest sellers.

## Why does the quest to create the perfect lawn inspire such extremes of devotion and revulsion?

good for two things: to frame a garden, and to have a place for small kids to play. Otherwise, go to the park."

Environmentalists have long attacked lawns as a symbol of wasteful disregard for the biosphere. In response, Walk and other members of the natural landscaping movement are ripping up their Kentucky bluegrass and replacing it with pesticide-free native plants and drought-resistant xeriscaping (rocks, cactus). On the anti-lawn right, artificial lawn aficionados are striking nature from the equation entirely by installing synthetic grass that looks and feels like the real thing.

Lawn opponents of all strains cite studies quantifying the cost of Americans' love affair with grass. Depending on conditions, a 25-by-40-foot yard can drink up to 10,000 gallons of water each summer. In some areas of the Western U.S., lawns account for 60 percent of urban water use. Keeping America's grass perfectly cropped requires 38 million lawnmowers, most of which use two-stroke engines that generate as much pollution in an hour as a car does during a hundred-mile trip. Each year, Americans apply more than 70 million pounds of pesticides to their lawns, some of which seeps into groundwater, threatening wildlife and human health.

Lawn lovers are unmoved by such statistics. The environmental drawbacks of lawns are exaggerated, they say, while the native plant movement is little more than a passing fad. "It's a wonderful source of business for landscape architects. 'Be the first in your neighborhood to have the new Lexus, the new native plant, the new whatever,'" deadpans Doug Fender, executive director of Turfgrass Producers International, an industry group. "But I'm standing on the high ground, and it's covered in turf."

He's right, in a way. The pro-lawn faction often has the law on its side. Let your patch of suburban real estate grow wild, and you could face the wrath of neighbors—and the local authorities. Weed laws on the books in towns across the country meticulously

The home improvement giant sponsors the annual \$10,000 All-American Lawn Contest; in the aftermath of September 11th, the competition is expected to be more popular than ever. "This year people are more connected, and they're trying to get to know their neighbors more," explains Brian Marshall, the company's marketing manager. The sentiment calls to mind the words of John J. Ingalls, from his soliloquy (and now Turfgrass Producers anthem) "A Tribute To Grass." Ingalls, a senator from Kansas during the late 19th century, wrote, "Grass is the forgiveness of Nature—her constant benediction. ... Fields trampled with battle, saturated with blood, torn with the ruts of cannon, grown green again with grass and carnage is forgotten."

**I grew up in a family of yard eccentrics**, and this preoccupation with lawns is familiar to me. My grandfather, a small-town Alabama businessman, was so enamored with nitrogen fertilizer that he once used it to grow his initials on the front lawn. The results were astounding: a giant, deep green "HR" shooting high above the rest of the faded grass. (My grandmother, furious, made him mow it constantly.) When my father was confronted with an area of our suburban lawn that was too steep to mow, he tied a rope to the push-mower and slowly lowered it down, a process that made lawn maintenance a long-afternoon affair.

The good-humored Rudisill, with his green lawn dye, doesn't fall far from my family tree. But he thinks his reputation as a lawn nut is unfair. When New Jersey imposed water use restrictions in 1999, Rudisill, who had invested "years and years" perfecting his lawn, couldn't bear to see it tarnish. Searching for a workaround, he stumbled upon a lawn dye used by the NFL and Disney World. "I thought, you know, I may not be able to water, but I'll feel a little bit better if it's green," he says.

And he did feel better. But a reporter caught wind of his technique, and before long he was described, in



**LAWNS MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS:** "There is a sense that, not only should neighbors care for their lawns, but if a neighbor isn't caring for his lawn, there's something wrong with him," observes Lee Coltman, a professor of anthropology at the University of California.



**U.S. REPRESENT:** Thad Johnson, of Bryan, Texas, used his First Amendment rights to boost neighborhood morale following the September 11th attacks. He and his wife, Annette, bought 60 cans of lawn paint from a local hardware store to do the job.

international media accounts, as a certified American lawn crazy. “It wasn’t like I painted the whole damn yard,” Rudisill protests. “People thought I was out there on my hands and knees with a roller or something. It was just touching up some spots here and there.”

**The question, of course, is why this quest** to create the perfectly manicured lawn inspires such extremes of devotion and revulsion. Why does Peter Platis, a restaurant manager and confessed lawn fanatic from Staten Island, New York, spend every weekend “puttering around the lawn on search and destroy missions, looking for weeds with Weed-B-Gone in hand.” Why does Elliot Fishbein, of Perry, Maine, insist on cutting his grass with a scythe? Why are otherwise normal Americans driven to such caricaturistic extremes in this endless, exhausting pursuit of the perfect lawn?

The answer dates back at least to the beginning of the 18th century, when American landscapers began creating English-style estates for wealthy landowners. During the 1920s, a partnership between the Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Golf Association resulted in the manufacture of grass strains, formerly suitable primarily to the Northeast, that could grow in a variety of climates. But the real democratization of grass came after World War II, when veterans fled inner cities to own single-family homes, each surrounded by a picture-perfect patch of lawn.

Even as lawns proliferated, their connotations of status remained. With the availability of mowers to trim them and fertilizers to keep them green, the clean-lawn aesthetic became a yardstick of success. Today, high-maintenance lawn care has created demand for the \$12,000 John Deere lawn and garden

tractor, domestic Keep Off the Grass signs, and dozens of varieties of power edgers. It has spawned a nationwide sport—lawnmower racing—in which participants ride bladeless, souped up yard rovers.

The beneficiaries of the country’s \$30 billion lawn care industry aren’t complaining, but even they marvel at the intensity of Americans’ passion for green lawns. “The thing that makes me and a lot of other people in the turf business crazy,” says Fender, “is the absolute compunction to have a perfectly manicured lawn at the height of summer. The plant may go dormant, and it may be brown. But it’s still a healthy lawn. Tell someone a brown lawn is healthy and they’ll think you are nuts.”

The well cared for lawn has become a signpost of security, an indication that all is well in family and community. So much so that in Israel, the only other nation with an equivalent lawn obsession, Israelis openly defy watering bans to keep their desert turf lush and use paint to make it appear greener. “Like Americans,” reports the *Jerusalem Post*, “Israelis are seeking suburban havens where they can withdraw into their own private world.”

In the American landscape, security means sameness. Lee Coltman, an anthropologist at the University of California at Los Angeles who studies lawn attitudes in suburban L.A., finds that people tend to equate unkempt lawns with laziness, indolence, or domestic discord. “There is a sense that, not only should neighbors care for their lawns, but if a neighbor isn’t caring for his lawn, there’s something wrong with him.”

This creates intense pressure to conform. In their 1998 exhibit, *The American Lawn: Surface of Everyday Life*, architects Elizabeth Diller and Richard Scofidio

documented 14 lawn-related court cases—from a failure to mow grass complaint Virginia, to the felony assault of a man mowing his lawn in California. After the neighbors of a New York resident complained that his yard was “depressing” and “noxious to look at,” he defended himself against a citation under a grass-height law by asserting his First Amendment right to communicate using his yard. The court didn’t concur. “The lawn says nothing,” the decision declared. “It represents nothing, and it symbolizes nothing.”

**Martha Crouch, a retired botanist** in Bloomington, Indiana, had her first run-in with the lawn police 20 years ago. After she decided to cultivate four-foot-tall blooming ironweed plants in her front yard, a uniformed officer showed up to present Crouch with a choice: She could either remove the plants, face fines for violating a local weed statute, or pay the city to mow them down. Too busy to fight the citation, Crouch tore out the plants herself.

“I vowed that some day, when I had more time, I would do something about it,” she says. Now retired, Crouch joined forces with other nativists to form the Earth Garden Collective, which is working to get Bloomington’s weed ordinance struck from the books.

Similar groups are sprouting up around the country as anti-lawn environmentalists’ arguments gain traction. The Environmental Protection Agency is advocating a shift from turf grass to native plants; Wild Ones, an organization that promotes native plant use, has built a network of chapters in 20 states; the National Wildlife Federation, which developed a program to certify yards as wildlife habitats, has seen a 10 percent increase in the number of certifications it issues each year. In the Southwest, native planting has been widely adopted as a way to conserve water. And cities and townships across the country are reforming weed laws to include exemptions for xeriscaping and backyard habitats.

Some communities have taken the radical step of banning lawns—or certain treatments of them—altogether. Minneapolis outlawed the use of specific lawn pesticides. Seaside, a 20-year-old resort community on Florida’s panhandle coast, mandates the use of native vegetation around every home, with grass confined to three public areas. “Seaside is built on a big sand dune,” says spokesman Stacey Brady. “Beach sand isn’t very nutritious for growing plants and greenery, and certainly not for grass.”

Then there are the simulationists, those opting for lawns that are entirely artificial. Synthetic grass manufactured by FieldTurf, a Canadian company, was originally designed to be used on sports fields. But FieldTurf discovered a growing residential market. Made of polyethylene and polypropylene fiber, the turf is produced in a variety of lengths and styles. Short blades are great for backyard use, but, explains Kathy Kennedy, general manager at Grass-Tech, a West Coast distributor of FieldTurf, “if you tell me that you



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**CROSS PURPOSES:** The beneficiaries of the \$30 billion lawn care industry marvel at Americans’ passion for green grass. “Tell someone a brown lawn is healthy and they’ll think you’re nuts,” says Doug Fender of Turfgrass Producers International, an industry lobbying group.

want to use it in the front yard, it never gets walked, on and you want it to be plush and beautiful, I can sell you a longer, fuller blade.” Kennedy says FieldTurf is doing “tremendous, booming business.”

FieldTurf really does look a lot like real grass. “People constantly stop to ask what I use to fertilize the lawn, and I tell them it’s not a real lawn,” says Jerry Kincanon of Auburn, California, whose wife and son installed the artificial grass as a Christmas gift after Kincanon spent years complaining about the hassle of lawn upkeep. “It was an expensive project”—FieldTurf runs \$8 to \$14 per square foot, pushing the typical installation into the thousands—“but we’ll never go back to lawns,” Kincanon says.

**While faux grass proponents find new ways** to perpetuate the lawn aesthetic without actually growing anything, naturalists hope the American ideal of the lush green lawn is on the wane. Native plant activists predict that with alternative yards gaining popularity, turf lawns may be in the minority within 25 to 30 years. Lawn industry advocates doubt it. “It’s funny how some of them say that native plant lawns are a trend,” says

Tom Delaney, executive vice president of the Professional Lawn Care Association of America, an industry lobbying group. “You go to an area with a thousand houses and two or three are like that. To me, that’s not a trend.”

Native plant proponents like Sandra Walk admit they may be underestimating the depth to which the green grass lawn has taken root in the American psyche. “People are waking up to native plants,” she says. “But for every one of them, I see two more signs on front lawns that say ‘Pesticides Applied Today.’” Others, like Martha Crouch, are just hoping to get the local weed laws off the books. “I’m not trying to discourage my neighbors from mowing their lawns,” she says. “I’m not trying to fine them every time they get out the lawnmower. But they can fine me when I don’t mow my lawn. That’s what bothers me. That I’m considered an outlaw.”

Back in New Jersey, Frank Rudisill takes a more philosophical view. “I can see their point,” he says of the alternative lawn activists. “I think it’s a little extreme. On the other hand, some people might think painting your grass is a little extreme, too.” 🚫

## MOWER’S INDEX WITH APOLOGIES TO HARPER’S

Number of Americans who mow their lawn each weekend, in millions: 54

Gallons of water required each year to grow 1,000 square feet of grass: 600

Gallons of water required each year by the average person: 130

Inches grass can grow to if left unmowed: 20

Inches grass must grow to in Rapid City, South Dakota, to be declared a nuisance: 8

Inches grass grows to in one week: 2.5

Number of different grasses and weeds in “perfect lawn,” circa 1876: 6

Number of different grasses in popular EnviroBlend, circa 2002: 3

Number of Web sites claiming that hospital recovery rates improve, and suicide and child mortality rates decline, in suites with a view of a lawn: 1

Number of doctors or research studies cited in support of this claim: 0

Number of deaths caused per year by lawn mowers and garden tractors: 15

Gallons of gas spilled each year by garden equipment: 17,000

Gallons of gas spilled by the Exxon Valdez: 11,000

Number of plays and musicals written about Larry Walters, the man who attached 42 helium balloons to his lawn chair and rose to a height of 16,000 feet: 2

Percentage of U.S. air pollution caused by lawn care equipment: 5

Number of words allowed per entry in the Toro Lawn Mower Poetry Contest: 100

