



Anthropology in Practice

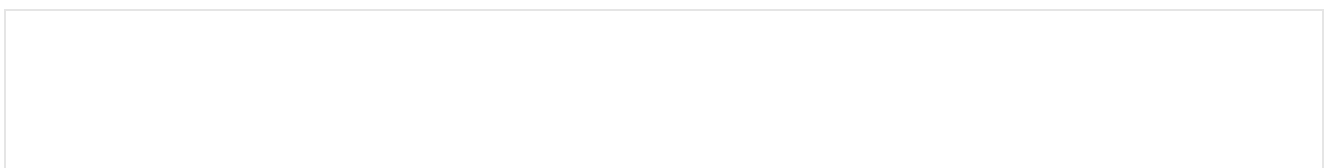
The American Obsession with Lawns

Lawns are the most grown crop in the U.S.—and they're not one that anyone can eat; their primary purpose is to make us look and feel good about ourselves

By Krystal D'Costa on May 3, 2017



Credit: Oliur Rahman Pexels



This article is a part of the Green Thumbery series, where everyday gardening meets history and science.

Warmer weather in the northern states means more time outside, and more time to garden. While urban gardeners may be planning their container gardens, in the suburbs, homeowners are thinking about their lawns. It's the time of year when the buzz of landscaping equipment begins to fill the air, and people begin to scrutinize their curb appeal.

The goal—as confirmed by the efforts of [Abraham Levitt](#) in his sweeping exercise in conformity (although it had been established well before that)—is to attain a patch of green grass of a singular type with no weeds that is attached to your home. It should be no more than an inch and a half tall, and neatly edged. This means you must be willing to care for it. It must be watered, mowed, repaired, and cultivated. Lawns are expensive—and some regard them as boring in their uniformity—but they are a hallmark of homeownership. Why do Americans place so much importance on lawn maintenance?

In *The Great Gatsby* when Nick Carraway rents his house on the West Egg, he apparently spends little time on lawn care. The disparity between his patch of greenery and the immaculately manicured grounds of Jay Gatsby's mansion is clear: “We both looked at the grass—there was a sharp line where my ragged lawn ended and the darker, well-kept expanse of his began,” reports Carraway. In preparation for Gatsby's luncheon with Daisy, Gatsby is so troubled by this difference that he sends his own gardeners to take care of the offensive strip of grass.

This concern is not limited to fiction. The state of a homeowner's lawn is important in relation to their status within the community and to the status of the community at large. Lawns connect neighbors and neighborhoods; they're viewed as an indicator of socio-economic character, which translates into property- and resale values. Lawns are indicative of success; they are a physical manifestation of the American Dream of home ownership. To have a well maintained lawn is a sign to others that you have the time and/or the money to support this attraction. It signifies that you care about belonging and want others to see that you are like them. A properly maintained lawn tells others you are a good neighbor. Many homeowner associations have regulations to the effect of how often a lawn must be maintained. So important is this physical representative of a desired status that fines can be levied if the lawn is not maintained. It's no wonder that Gatsby wanted Carraway's lawn addressed: it would reflect on him in a variety of ways if it were not.

But lawns are a recent development in the human history of altering our environment. The landscape that greeted the early European colonists in America had already been greatly altered by Native Americans for the purposes of hunting and fishing. These first colonists found no pasture grasses as these were not native to the eastern seaboard. In New England,

the grasses were mostly annuals, like broomstraw, wild rye, and marsh grass, and had a lower nutritional value than the grasses of northwest Europe. Livestock are not particularly picky when it's time to eat, though, and as European cattle, sheep, and goats spread throughout the east coast, these native grasses disappeared. Once those grasses were gone, many animals died following those first winters from starvation or from eating poisonous plants in desperation.

This created a rather stark landscape which was not conducive to raising animals, a chief concern for survival at the time. So as a part of their supply lists, settlers in the 17th-century requested grass and clover seeds. The supply ships brought more than “good” grasses, however. At the ports, the dump site for ships introduced weeds, like dandelions and plantains, from bedding, fodder, and manure. By 1672 twenty-two European species of weeds had taken up residence around Massachusetts Bay.

These foreign grasses quickly spread across the continent—they may have initially been immigrants in their own right but within a few generations, they were definitely naturalized American citizens. For example, Guinea grass and Bermuda grass from Africa spread throughout the south. The latter became important for levee stabilization. And Kentucky bluegrass, which hailed from Europe and the Middle East, spread throughout the Appalachian Mountains and the Midwest. It's now the most favored American lawn grass. In the west, grasses that originated in the Mediterranean took root as Spanish soldiers and missionaries settled there.

All of this meant that by the 18th-century, farmers had a selection of naturalized grasses to choose from and very few were cultivating their own grasses. But as animals overgrazed their pastures, their fields were consumed by briars and bushes. The market was ripe for grass seed once again, and several seed houses and nurseries were established in Philadelphia. By the 19th-century, grass was agricultural crop, making it available for residential purposes.

Against this timeline and given the priorities of American colonists, it is no coincidence then that before the Civil War front lawns were uncommon. Where they did exist, they were somewhat an experiment by the wealthy in a new style of landscaping.

Between the American Revolution and 1820, very few Americans were traveling back and forth to Europe. But European styles persisted as a cultural import and as the established bastion of success. Design aesthetics were copied from literature and landscape paintings. For this reason, most homes featured a small flower garden in the front, and an enclosed yard in the back. The gardens were a carryover from the European enclosed style of gardening.

In the 18th-century, the use of green, expansive spaces began to appear in landscape design in France and England. At the palace of Versailles, a small lawn—a *tapis vert* (i.e., a green

carpet)—was installed. And in England, the trend inclined toward more open landscapes with fewer fences and hedges. This space was covered by closely mown grass. Thomas Jefferson, who was among the few to see these changes firsthand, was greatly impressed by the large swaths of green turf that were common to English country estates and tried to emulate this style at Monticello.

George Washington hired English landscape gardeners to achieve a similar end. Mount Vernon had a bowling green and a deer park, also common elements in English garden design. The popularity of Washington and Mount Vernon helped the contagion of the idea of a lawn as images of Mount Vernon were produced and distributed throughout the United States into the 18th- and 19th-centuries. This gave wealthy Americans something to copy and aspire to. Coming from a leader such as Washington lent credence to the perception that this was a break was the norm and unique to America.

Today, there is a significant industry that exists around lawn care and management. From equipment to chemicals to seed, lawns require knowledge, time, and money. In these early days of the American colony, lawns still needed those things. Those with lawns were those who could afford help in maintaining it, as none of those aids existed. For these reasons, lawns would not reach the middle class until well after the Civil War.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, most houses in America were built close to the street with a small closed garden in the back of the house. This design reflected the emphasis on privacy that had been handed down from European residential design—whereas lawns, as we know them, are connective and communal, gardens are private. The transition to this more public placement of lawns is tied to three major developments in the rise of the American suburbs:

1. The public park movement championed by Frederick Law Olmsted, which greatly influenced the first suburban communities on the East Coast. These communities were often modeled after parks with a communal green and additional green spaces, and often included the word “Park” in their names; Tuxedo Park in New York and Llewellyn Park in New Jersey, for example.
2. The adoption of automobiles and the rise of long distance travel by train in the 1920s pressured homeowners to beautify the fronts of their homes for the sake of passersby. Houses were intentionally built facing the rail line to enhance the scenery and experience for travelers.
3. Following WWII, the federal government financed low-cost mortgages, which propelled builders to create blue-collar tract housing. These establishments often featured lawns in an attempt to mimic upper middle class suburban development and attract residents.

But even in the wake of these developments, it's important to note that lawns were still restricted to those with economic means. Most Americans in the late 19th- and early 20th-centuries (urban factory workers, southern tenant farmers, and sharecroppers) had no front yard. And even among those with money, many still subscribed to the English Garden aesthetic as that had already been established, and did not have the means to undertake sweeping landscape changes.

Following the Civil War and toward the end of the 19th-century, however, the Northern states entered into a period of growth following the Civil War. Railroad tycoons and factory owners saw their investments and businesses grow, and as such, they looked to accumulate material symbols to signify their prosperity. The front lawn became an exhibit space. The rise of printed gardening advice enforced this position. It became a part of regular news circulation—newspapers covered lawn care and flower cultivation in an effort to boost circulation—and consequently, everyday conversations. The awareness of lawns and their significance was made into an everyday occurrence.

It was still an exercise in wealth, however. Lawn grass was not easy to grow. (It's not easy today, either.) Pesticides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers were virtually unknown until recently. And when lawns were patchy or failed to grow, homeowners were advised to rip it up and start over.

The rise in economic opportunities meant that homeowners who were inclined to pursue a green carpet of grass could hire someone to attend to its needs—another indicator of success. Their leisure time would not be consumed by the maintenance work required for the lawn. (Interestingly, that time *could* be invested in gardens without the same sense of work—gardens were for leisure.)

These themes are reflected in our relationships to our lawns today. My home, for example, sits between two extremes: on one side, we have neighbors who meticulously care for their lawn—they have a sprinkler system and regularly scheduled lawn maintenance—and on the other, we have neighbors who let their lawn run wild and will mow once or twice a season—their lawn is riddled with dandelions and other weeds. The homeowner in the former instance stopped by to tell us that she was seeing signs of crabgrass on her lawn. She scrutinized our patch of greenery as well as the other neighbors' before going home. While this overall dynamic is common throughout our neighborhood—there is a mix of maintenance—she was specifically concerned on how this would impact and reflect on her.

Lawns continue to be markers of success. Many people do employ landscapers who provide weekly or monthly maintenance so that they do not need to invest their own time in the mundane tasks of cutting and bagging their grass, and edging their lawns. Sprinkler systems help keep the grass watered and there's a bounty of chemicals to keep errant weeds at bay.

The sheer volume of resources required to keep lawns alive is staggering. And seems particularly wasteful in consideration of drought plagued places, like California. The significance of lawns persisted in the west for a long time, and was aided by water management technologies that helped transform arid landscapes into lush ones. But that is changing as well, perhaps in part due to the awareness made possible by social media. Lawns require the equivalent of 200 gallons of drinking water per person per day. Californians, who are acutely aware of this wastage, have taken to shaming (#droughtshame) neighbors who persist in watering their lawns.

We are at a moment when the American Dream, inasmuch as it still exists, is changing. The idea of homeownership is untenable or undesirable for many. While green spaces are important, a large area of green grass seems to be a lower priority for many. With a growing movement that embraces a more natural lifestyle, there is a trend toward the return of naturalized lawns that welcome flowering weeds, and subsequently support a more diverse entomological ecosystem.

Old habits die hard, however. And it is hard to also abandon this idea of a manifestation of material success, especially as it is so readily recognized as such. As of 2005, lawns covered an estimated 63,000 square miles of America. That's about the size of Texas. It's the most grown crop in the United States--and it's not one that anyone can eat; it's primary purpose is to make us look and feel good about ourselves.

Americans have taken their landscape aesthetic around the world. American communities in Saudi Arabia have lawns in the middle of the desert. American embassies and consulates around the world have lawns. And when the Cultural Revolution swept through China, any lawns that had been established under American and British influence were pulled out. Lawns are American. But they're also an anomaly. And they may no longer fit the realities of the world we live in.

How do you feel about lawns? Do you have one? Have you given up? Have you gotten into a war with a neighbor over maintenance? Comments have been disabled on Anthropology in Practice, but you can always join the community on Facebook.

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