

Out of fashion: Green lawns

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By Keith Simmons, USA TODAY

USA TODAY OPINION

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By Laura Vanderkam

Diane Faulkner's lawn was always causing her trouble. This [Jacksonville, Fla.](#), resident traveled frequently, and in her absence, her thirsty, fussy grass would go brown or otherwise run afoul of her neighborhood association's rules. She hated returning home to a \$50 fine, but the last straw was when her travels took her to rural [Kenya](#). Immersed in local life, she'd wake up at dawn with the villagers to walk miles along a dried-up river toward a water source, then return with a few gallons for cooking and washing.

"That was their whole morning," she says. As soon as she got on the plane back to America, she had a thought: "How many gallons of

water do I waste on that stinking lawn?" And more broadly, why did she even have a lawn in the first place?

It's a question a growing number of sweaty Americans are asking as they push (or ride) their lawnmowers in the August heat. While a field of green, closely cropped grass is the default landscape for a "nice" neighborhood, there's no reason it has to be. And there are plenty of reasons it shouldn't be — at least if we value the planet and our time.

21 million acres

Historians aren't exactly sure why lawns became as closely tied to the American dream as homeownership itself. Perhaps early suburban sorts wished to mimic the look of British castle grounds (minus the sheep that were responsible for the close cropping). The fad spread, the lawn care industry grew, and now [21 million acres](#) of the USA are covered with grasses that wouldn't grow well here if left to their own devices.

The fight to maintain this unnatural state exacts a toll. "It's essentially like pushing a boulder up a hill," notes Ted Steinberg, an environmental historian at [Case Western Reserve University](#) and author of *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn*.

According to Stephen Kress of the [National Audubon Society](#), homeowners apply [78 million pounds of pesticides](#) a year to lawns, often to kill "weeds" such as dandelions and clover, perhaps not noticing that these plants look just as green as grass when you mow them.

Mowing itself requires fuel, just like our cars, with a similar impact on the environment. And all these woes are before you even get to the issue of water. According to Kress, maintaining non-native plants requires 10,000 gallons of water per year per lawn, over and above rainwater. That water doesn't just show up by itself; it requires energy to get to your hose. In California, for example, the energy required to treat and move water amounts to [19% of total electricity use](#) in the state.

In short, lawns are incredibly inefficient, and not just from an environmental perspective. Maintenance requires time and money, which people usually claim are in short supply. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey, the average father of school-aged kids spends 1.6 hours a week on lawn and garden care — more time than he spends on reading, talking, playing or doing educational activities with his kids combined.

Shaming away a trend

For all these reasons, there's a growing backlash against suburban seas of green. "The perfect lawn is in peril," reports Steinberg. Big chunks of Canada have banned certain lawn pesticides. In the U.S., municipalities such as Los Angeles and Raleigh, N.C., regulate how many times a week homeowners can turn on the sprinklers.

That said, while rationing water during droughts has merit, I don't think policymakers should start regulating lawns broadly. Deploying inspectors to count the square footage of grass vs. wild plants is a waste of resources when states are cutting teachers and cops. The best approach is for all of us to start thinking of lawns as a fashion — a fashion like wearing the feathers of rare birds in hats was once a fashion. Fashions can change when enough people decide they are ridiculous or wasteful. Few parents would light a cigarette at a playground anymore, even if it's not illegal, and we should start treating the presence of a vast, green, cropped grass lawn in the middle of summer the same way: as a weird and antisocial thing.

Certainly, there are options.

"You don't have to trade off the lawn for some hideous alternative," notes Penny Lewis, executive director of the Ecological Landscaping Association. First, ask "how much lawn do you have and how much do you really need?"

Some homeowners keep a small patch of grass around the house and turn parts of the lawn into a meadow that attracts birds and butterflies. Others simply swear off pesticides and let the grass go dormant in the summer.

Faulkner, on the other hand, went all-in. She redid her lawn with rocks and hearty plants such as Confederate Jasmine, arranged to look like an English garden. Because all her plants grow well in Florida, they require no upkeep. "I don't have to mow, I don't have to water, I don't have to trim," she reports. Her water bill has gone from \$80-\$90/month to \$20.

Her only lawn headache now? Figuring out what to do with the time and money she's saving — a problem let's hope more homeowners have soon.

Laura Vanderkam, author of 168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think, is a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors.

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Stewart Thomas (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 9/2/2010 12:50:23 PM

People feel very strongly about their yards, gardens and lawns -- as evidenced by the letters responding to Laura Vanderkam's article. There are clearly many options available on how to landscape your yard as well as how to put in and care for a lawn.

Here's the issue in a nutshell: in Florida half of all treated drinking water is used to water lawns. That water is pumped directly out of the aquifer. The aquifer that supports Florida's population, agriculture and ecosystems is falling steadily every year and has done so since at least the 1930s.

Ask anyone involved with water in any way in Florida: what is the one thing we could do to live sustainably with water in Florida? The answer: do something about all the lawns.

If you've changed your turf to something less thirsty, put in a rainbarrel and soaker hoses, or even reduced your lawn cover -- you're doing a great thing!!! Instead of bashing Ms. Vanderkam, let her know you've heard the message, taken action and are talking to your friends and neighbors.

For everyone else, here are some suggestions:

- Reduce your lawn cover to something enjoyable and manageable. Surround your lawn with butterfly plants, native plantings, and an edible garden. You'll have more butterflies, less mosquitoes and something to eat. Your costs will go down and your home will probably increase slightly in resale value.
- Water your lawn less: even Florida's turf grass association says Floridians tend to overwater lawns by as much as 50 - 100%

- Capture water off your roof, into rainbarrels or directly into gutters connected to soaker hoses. Watch your water bill go down.

I'm working with a group called The Blue Path at TheBluePath.org and we see changed action about lawns as a way to save money, save water and more. North Florida in particular, is blessed with over 700 fresh water springs. At this time these springs are in peril as water levels drop in the aquifer. We want our children and grandchildren to experience these natural wonders, so please, do something about your lawn today.

Stewart J. Thomas
TheBluePath.org

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FlaSodGrowers (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/30/2010 7:46:35 AM
GRASS ISN'T "OUT"; RESPONSIBLE CARE IS "IN"

Laura Vanderkam's recent column "Out of Fashion: Green Lawns" highlighted some changes that are occurring in yards across Florida and the nation, but unfortunately, reached some wrong conclusions.

Saying that responsible landscape choices save money, time and water was right on. The Jacksonville homeowner's story was a good example of making appropriate changes that better suited her lifestyle. In fact, homeowner associations throughout Florida are recognizing that there are alternate landscaping styles that can reflect a homeowner's preference while still supporting property values (and in a state suffering significantly from real estate foreclosures, this is no small concern).

Implying that grass is "bad" and should be eliminated to "save the planet" is both simplistic and off base.

Besides ignoring the unique, scientifically proven environmental benefits that turfgrass provides, Ms. Vanderkam completely ignores the millions of homeowners who responsibly care for their lawns.

The irrigation system at my home, for example, has run maybe ten times in the past year, since we turn the system off and operate it manually to water only as needed. We fertilize about once a year (or less) and happily mow the green weeds that pop up, rather than relentlessly pursuing their elimination.

For most of the year, my St. Augustine grass sits out there quietly doing its job with little attention and few resources. In this case, where's the logic in removing a plant that's making oxygen, capturing and filtering pollutants out of rainwater through its dense root system, and storing up carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas)?

What may rightfully be falling out of fashion is "overcare" – a demand for perfection. Casual landscapes that combine relaxed expectations with deliberate, well-informed choices reflect both our changing culture and our heightened environmental awareness. The key is matching your landscape to your needs, your preferences and your site, then caring for it responsibly.

It may be as simple as choosing a new turf type that's resistant to pests, needs less water or fertilizer, or is a slow-grower that minimizes mowing. In some cases, it's selecting a ground cover that performs better in an area or adding planting beds for variety and diversity. And everyone can incorporate common-sense changes to their maintenance routines that will make a big impact. Turn your irrigation system off in cool or rainy months, and water only as needed. Make sure you identify the cause of a problem before pouring on treatments or excess water. Be sure you read the fertilizer directions before applying, and choose a lawn-care service that understands more than just "mow and go".

Grass isn't "out"; thoughtful choices and responsible landscape care are "in".

And these are qualities that should always be in fashion.

- Betsy McGill, Executive Director of the Florida Sod Growers Cooperative

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Den Gardner (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/25/2010 3:21:08 PM
LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The article written by Laura Vanderkam ♦ Out of fashion: Green Lawns USA TODAY 8/17/10 begs for a response from our non-profit organization: Project EverGreen. It does an injustice to the public by misinforming, distorting and omitting information to consumers.

Project EverGreen is a non-profit association whose mission is: "To preserve and enhance green space in our communities for today and future generations." Our GreenCare for Communities program and GreenCare for Troops program are nationally known and we

believe Ms. Vanderkam's remarks are misguided and don't represent the thinking of main street folks.

Ms. Vanderkam negative references to lawns and suggesting changing our thinking about lawns might save our planet is just slightly over the top. Not unusual for many who use emotion and simple solutions as the antidote for "saving the planet."

Let's talk about the "real environmental benefits of natural grass," as stated by The Lawn Institute. America's residential lawns along with the natural turfgrass that covers golf courses, parks, commercial landscapes, greenbelts, athletic fields, etc, helps to cool the air, produces oxygen, filters out pollutants, captures and suppresses dust, recharges and filters our ground water supply, reduces storm water runoff, controls soil erosion, retains and sequesters carbon, restores soil quality, dissipates heat, lessens the "heat island effect" and has been proven to improve mental and physical health. These benefits come from University researchers throughout the country who have spent years studying turfgrass.

Turfgrass is one of the best groundcovers to actually filter water and allow it to penetrate the soil and recharge the watershed. Grass actually builds organic material into the soil. Let's just let Ms. Vanderkam's opinions be just that: opinions.

We'd rather believe the reality of those who research turfgrass for a living. Shame on us for not doing a better job to educate and inform the public about the benefits of maintained green spaces.

Den Gardner, Executive Director
Project EverGreen
120 Main St. West, Suite 200
New Prague, MN 56071
dengardner@projectevergreen.com

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Seneca58 (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/25/2010 9:53:35 AM

We would like to respond to the article written by Laura Vanderkam ♦ Out of fashion: Green Lawns USA TODAY 8/17/10. Lawns are not "wasteful suburban seas of green." She fails to mention the tremendous environmental benefits of lawns. Even the EPA's publication "Healthy Lawn, Healthy Environment" says healthy grass provides feeding grounds for birds, who find it a rich source of insects, worms, and other food. When properly managed, greenscapes especially lawns trap carbon dioxide, produce oxygen, prevent soil erosion, greatly mitigate stormwater runoff and enhance the recharge of groundwater. Care of the lawn and landscape helps protect residential landscapes which are tremendous economic assets, which increase property values by as much as fifteen percent, and these vital green spaces enhance the beauty and overall healthy state of our communities. Gardening has been the number one hobby of Americans for years and the enjoyment and exercise in caring for the lawn has been part of it. Weeds such as dandelions and clover may be desired by few but those that are allergic to bee sting and pollen and the majority of the public want them controlled. Even a Florida friendly landscape can be efficient with the inclusion of a lawn in the landscape. It's imperative too throughout this diverse country that homeowners use the appropriate lawn varieties and landscapes for their area. PLANET continues to educate consumers, legislators, the media, and communities about the environmental importance of lawns and landscapes, and explain why their care improves the environment for all.

Sincerely,
Tom Delaney
Director of Government Affairs

Professional Landcare Network (PLANET)

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James Novak (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/25/2010 8:32:18 AM
Open LETTER TO THE EDITOR of USA Today

The article written by Laura Vanderkam ♦ Out of fashion: Green Lawns USA TODAY 8/17/10 begs for a response. It contains some misinformation, a distorted view of the facts and some very important omissions. At the outset Ms. Vanderkam refers to lawns as "wasteful suburban seas of green" and suggests that by changing our thinking about lawns we just might save our planet. Unfortunately Ms. Vanderkam fails to mention the tremendous environmental benefits of natural grass and what that "sea of green" actually provides.

America's residential lawns along with the natural turfgrass that covers golf courses, parks, commercial landscapes, greenbelts, athletic fields, etc, helps to cool the air, produces oxygen, filters out pollutants, captures and suppresses dust, recharges and filters our ground water supply, reduces storm water runoff, controls soil erosion, retains and sequesters carbon, restores soil quality, dissipates heat, lessens the "heat island effect" and has been proven to improve mental and physical health.

Dr. Thomas Watschke of Pennsylvania State University has stated that "The strategic use of turfgrass is the most sensible and economically feasible approach to countering the greenhouse effect in urban areas." He also estimates that turfgrasses trap an estimated 12 million tons of dust and dirt released in the atmosphere annually and 55 square feet of turfgrass provides enough oxygen for one person for an entire day.

Dr. James Beard, Professor Emeritus, Texas A&M University has stated, "One of the key mechanisms by which turfgrasses preserve water is their superior capability to trap and hold runoff, which results in more water infiltrating through the soil turfgrass ecosystem". He also wrote, "Turfgrasses are relatively inexpensive, durable groundcovers that protect our valuable, nonrenewable soil resource from water and wind erosion".

Dr. John Stier, University of Wisconsin has commented, "The roots of turfgrass have a higher plant density than native grasses which affects infiltration and decreases water runoff and increase percolation."

Ron Follett of the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) Soil-Plant Nutrient Research Unit in Fort Collins, CO., and Yailing Qian of Colorado State University estimate that nearly a ton of carbon per acre, per year is stored in the soil of golf course fairways and greens.

Cristina Milesi of the NASA Ames Research Center estimates that lawn areas in the U.S. alone could store up to 37 billion pounds of carbon.

The Maryland Turfgrass Survey 1996-An Economic Value Study reported that "the front lawns on a block of eight average homes have the cooling effect of 70 tons of air conditioning".

These research scientists and green industry professionals evidently know something Ms. Vanderkam doesn't know . . . that turfgrass just might be saving our planet.

And what of the new varieties of turfgrass that are more drought tolerant, require less water, have a greater natural resistance to pests and disease or don't require mowing as frequently? Or new and innovative advancements in technology over the last several years that has resulted in lawn mowers that are more fuel efficient and eco-friendly?

Ms. Vanderkam reports that Stephen Kress of the National Audubon Society has suggested that maintaining non-native plants requires 10,000 gallons of water per year, per lawn, over and above rainwater.

I suspect homeowners in Seattle, Washington, known for its wet climate (36 inches of rain per year) would be somewhat surprised if not amused to learn that they were using 10,000 gallons of water a year to water their lawns. The same would likely hold true for other regions of the country where annual rainfall requires little if any additional irrigation.

John Mascaro, Executive Director, North Florida Sports Turf Managers Association put a pencil to Kress's claim that it takes 10,000 gallons of water to maintain the average lawn and offered the following:

"It's estimated that the national average lawn size is about one-fifth of an acre for the 85 million households with a private lawn. (http://www.grounds-mag.com/mag/grounds_maintenance_lawn_size/)

If one acre equals 43,560 square feet than 1/5 acre equals 8,712 square feet. 10,000 gallons of water divided by 8,712 square feet equals 1.1478 gallons per square foot per year. One US gallon equals 128 US fluid ounces; so that's 146.92 ounces per square foot per year. If we divided by one year (52.177457 weeks considering Leap year) that equals 2.81 ounces of water per week per square foot or .40 ounces per day, that's less than a ♦ ounce of water for a plant that provides numerous benefits to our environment!"

Dr. Ranajit Sahu has stated, "Many point out the excessive use of watering for lawns. However, excessive use of water and pesticides is neither necessary nor desirable for maintaining healthy turfgrass. In fact, what is often lost in the rancorous debate is that turfgrasses evolved over millions of years without irrigation systems and pesticides.

"Second, many point out the emissions from lawn equipment. But, it is ironic that critics fail to note the tremendous reduction in air emissions and noise emanations (equipment will be 95 percent cleaner under EPA's latest emissions standards) that have been achieved from lawn and garden equipment in recent years, and the fact that managing lawn and turf areas lead to reductions in dust pollution.

"The benefits of turfgrass are numerous and alternatives are often simply not realistic (xeriscaping or vegetable gardening), and in many instances far worse (artificial turf or paved surfaces). With proper education and awareness, it is now possible to retain the benefits of

lawns and turfgrass areas while minimizing or eliminating the negatives associated with water overuse and other harmful practices leading to an experience that affords community, lifestyle and environmental benefits.”

Turfgrass and more specifically, that “sea of green” is one of the best groundcovers to actually filter water and allow it to penetrate the soil and recharge the watershed. Impervious surfaces like cement cause water to run off, and in urban areas, water has to be treated by municipal wastewater facilities, or put into retention areas that are lined with . . . you guessed it, turfgrass.

Since turfgrass is a plant that covers close to 100% of the soil surface as well as the matching area in root zone, it is the ideal plant for lawns. Compared to bunch type plants or vines like the “Confederate Jasmine” suggested in Ms. Vanderkam’s article, that may have a fair to good ground cover rate with a Planting Density of 1700-4800 individual plants per acre, but the nature of vines is to have large leaves to gather the sunlight and a fairly sparse plant mass on the ground. While it looks green, it has nowhere near the potential to stop soil erosion and allow water infiltration into the soil. Soil erosion is a real problem, especially on sloped areas where grass is not present. In fact, the best farming soils in the country were former grasslands. Grass actually builds organic material into the soil and creates the best soils on earth.

For Ms. Vanderkam to state that “lawns are incredibly inefficient, and not just from an environmental perspective,” couldn’t be farther from reality.

To paraphrase Ms. Vanderkam, if we change the public’s understanding about the benefits of “suburban seas of green,” we just might help save our planet.

Jim Novak
Public Relations Manager
The Lawn Institute
2 East Main Street
East Dundee, IL 60118
847-649-5555 847-649-5555
jnovak@TurfGrassSod.org



TLI (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/24/2010 3:36:55 PM

The Benefits of Turfgrass (Ecosystem Services) that most people take for granted:

Environmental Benefits of Lawns

- ◆ Cools the Air
- ◆ Produces Oxygen
- ◆ Filters Air & Reduces Pollution
- ◆ Captures & Suppresses Dust
- ◆ Recharges & Filters Groundwater Supply
- ◆ Reduces Storm Water Runoff
- ◆ Controls Soil Erosion
- ◆ Retains and Sequesters Carbon
- ◆ Assists Decomposition of Pollutants
- ◆ Restores Soil Quality

Community & Human Health Benefits of Lawns

- ◆ Enhances Community Pride & Social Harmony
- ◆ Offers a Natural Playing Surface for Recreation
- ◆ Provides a Safe Surface & Reduces Injuries
- ◆ Promotes Outdoor Activity & Exercise
- ◆ Improves Physical & Mental Health
- ◆ Relieves Stress

- ◆ Lowers Allergy Related Problems
- ◆ Dissipates Heat & Cools the Environment
- ◆ Reduces Glare
- ◆ Diminishes Noise Pollution
- ◆ Minimizes Nuisance Pests
- ◆ Compliments Overall Landscaping
- ◆ Preserves Natural Wildlife Habitat

Economic Benefits of Lawns

- ◆ Increases Property Values
- ◆ Reduces Home Cooling Costs
- ◆ Provides a Low-Cost Ground Cover
- ◆ Serves as a Fire Barrier
- ◆ Improves Visibility & Deters Crime
- ◆ Boosts Human Productivity

Scientific research studies/data to support these benefits is available at: TheLawnInstitute.org

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[my2cents1970](#) (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/24/2010 8:36:26 AM

Sorry to burst your bubble Park3, but pesticide is a catch all term that covers more than just insecticides. The EPA website explains that: "Though often misunderstood to refer only to insecticides, the term pesticide also applies to herbicides, fungicides, and various other substances used to control pests."

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[park3](#) (0 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/18/2010 7:32:16 PM

Laura had me convinced until I got to the part about the 78 million pounds of PESTICIDES being used to kill the WEEDS in lawns. I don't know of any pesticides that will kill lawn weeds (most people would use herbicides for that task!). For me, her credibility is now right next to Al Gore's on global warming. I am surprised that nobody at USA Today noticed of her lack of understanding.

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[American People](#) (132 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/18/2010 7:51:30 AM

You have to laugh and cry when people are labeled either "bad" or "good" based on how they take care of their lawn. To the judgmental people on this board, I say "get a life." To some other, like "torimom," I say "thanks for the information."

Good day!

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[torimom](#) (55 friends, [send message](#)) wrote: 8/18/2010 3:54:47 AM

The number one mistake that people make with their lawns is cutting it too closely. Put your mower on the highest height setting and

leave it there. You won't have to mow as often, the root system is encouraged to grow more deeply, and that in turn makes the grass more resistant to drought. We rarely have to water our lawn anymore since we were told by a lawncare professional to do this.

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