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The History of Lawns and Lawnmaking (II)

by Art Drysdale

by **Art Drysdale**

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Art Drysdale, a life-long resident of Toronto and a horticulturist well known all across Canada, is now a resident of Parksville, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, just north of Nanaimo. He has renovated an old home and has a new garden there. His radio gardening vignettes are heard in south-western Ontario over two radio stations: Easy 101 FM out of Tillsonburg at 2 PM weekdays and CD98.9 FM out of Norfolk County at 11:40 AM weekdays.

Art also has his own website at <http://www.artdrysdale.com>



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This steam-powered lawn mower, made by Shanks of Arbroath, England, was introduced in 1902. The various forms of grass clippers and trimmers below are part of the exhibition at Britain's Museum of Garden History located in Lambeth Palace on the south side of the Thames River in London. Author photo.

Last week in the first part of my "History of lawns and lawnmaking" I quoted author Kay Sancecki's original 1979 article from *Gardeners' Chronicle* and *Horticultural Trade Journal* (out of Britain). I'll conclude that piece here this week. First though, I must once again touch on a particular sentence: "Maintenance between 'mowing' consisted of sweeping up the trimmings, gathering up the daisy heads with a daisy rake, aerating with a fork or spike, and rolling to maintain a generally even surface."

Kay actually wrote "Maintenance between 'mowing' consisted of sweeping up the trimmings with a besom...". I left out the reference to 'besom' because though I knew it was some sort of broom, I wasn't sure just what type and a brief check didn't reveal a good definition. Right after my AM740 broadcast, Malcolm Ward, an old friend now living in England called. He is in Canada visiting and was listening to the programme. It turns out, coincidentally, that he has recently purchased a small company in England which is the last such that actually produces besoms on a commercial basis. There is an interesting story behind besoms, past and present, as well as the two different types (birch and heather) and what their use is presently. Malcolm will be a guest this Saturday and tell my radio audience more about this disappearing craft.

To return to Kay Sancecki's article, we pick up in the second half of the 19th century. "Numerous designs of lawn mowers were patented in the USA, but Great Britain led the world in grass cutting machinery. Width of cylinder and blades varied enormously from the 15-22 cm (6-9") blades for edges and borders to 1 m (40") cutting blades for pony-drawn machines designed for the splendid lawns of private establishments and the then newly popular public parks, playing fields and pleasure grounds.

"Shanks first patented a horse-drawn mower, the Five Roller, in 1842, and in 1893, J. Sumner patented a steam-powered grass cutter that resembled a Thames River tug. It weighed 1½ tons and was manufactured by the then Leyland Steam Motor Company.

"Just before the turn of the century, Grimly and Son of Leicester patented the first gas-engine mower in Britain and this was followed in 1902 by Ransomes' mighty 1 m+ (42") machine with a 6 hp water-cooled engine.

"However, scythes continued to be used, and sickles, billhooks and hand shears constituted the only method of dealing with rough grass and grass banks. A breakthrough came in 1934 when Power Specialists of Slough (near Heathrow Airport) designed the Rotoscythe, a spitting and fuming, but tough machine that, with blades spinning horizontally to the grass, could be coaxed on to banks and below shrubs where the grass was rough.

"Once manufacture was resumed after WWI, demand grew for the rotary-blade machine, and the Flymo revolutionized the English lawn on both domestic and institutional bases. It uses a cushion of air created by the machine and its protective hood, to carry it over edges and up and down banks, which allows it to be used some-what like a domestic vacuum cleaner--the operator needing no sense of direction or keen eye for a straight line.

"All of this is not to say that good cylindrical blade machines did not continue to be manufactured and used, as Canadian parksmen presently using Ransomes equipment well know. Where a high quality of turf was required, the cylindrical blade machines never left the scene.

"The acceptance of an exterior green carpet--for many lawns are little else--in these days of high costs, has reversed the development of the lawn as a feature. The more recent expanded quest for perfection in turf quality was heightened by the popularity of recreational activities on grass. Tennis courts, croquet lawns, bowling greens, cricket pitches, putting greens, badminton courts and outdoor archery areas all demanded groundsmen who were dedicated to the task of turf management. The era of lawn and green perfection lasted until WWII, by which time thousands of man-years must have been sacrificed to turf.

"Simultaneously with the formal sports areas, the pleasure gardens developed as informal areas. William Robinson had first advocated the naturalizing of bulbs in grass in the 1880s. By the time Thomas Mawson (landscape architect for such huge projects as the Peace Palace in The Hague, and the man for whom Howard Dunington Grubb--Canada's first landscape architect--worked before he came to Canada in 1913) was writing *The Art and Craft of Garden Making* in the











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1920s, he advocated 'grass running off at all sides into undulating lawns, broad grass glades or vistas.'

"Whatever the purpose of the grass, however, the correct seed mixture was, and remains, of primary importance. Special mixtures were widely advertised during the 1870s and the 1880s and onwards for varying uses to which the turf was to be put.

"In the 1920s and 1930s, the choice of grasses was widened, The British Sports Turf Research Institute was founded in 1929, mainly for the investigation of grasses suitable for golf courses. Today the grass mixtures designed to tolerate wear and close mowing have changed, and only one or two grasses that Thomas Mawson recommended nearly 80 years ago remain in use. Newer cultivars include many that are particularly adapted to use for sports areas.

"An argument has always been maintained for sodding or seeding to establish domestic and institutional lawns, and methods of sodding have changed remarkably little over the years. The orthodox size of sod in the 1890 – 1920 era was 90 x 30 cm (3 x 1'), and rolled while in transit, or 30 cm square and handled flat.

"In the general gardening press of the 1920s, instructions were sometimes given for the establishment of grass by vegetative means using the stolons of 'various crab grasses.' Clipped stolons were scattered over the pre-prepared surface and rolled in immediately. But, with the 'Emerald Velvet' craze, and disaster of 1952 – '53, stoloniferous grasses are hardly heard of today, except perhaps in trade or professional circles. (In Canada, a similar 'craze' existed for one spring season, when even Eaton's department stores sold stolons of a US cultivar of Manilagrass or zoysia, only to have all of their customers find their lawns 'dead' from the first hint of cold weather in the autumn--this happened in the '60s.)

"Although little practical application appears to have been given to the vegetative method of producing turf, some [bowling and golf] greens have certainly been established using redtop (*Agrostis alba*) which forms a system of surface stolons.

"Where management practice is satisfactory, weed invasion is normally expected to be low, and today selective weed killers are resorted to, but hand weeding or weed spiking was practised previously.

"In 1924, A.J. Macself, the prolific writer and editor of *Amateur Gardening*, in his book *Grass*, illustrated the main tools required: turf beater, daisy grubber, spiked roller, edging shears and weed eradicators--not very different today--and added the besom (broom made of spiked birch branches) and the spiked harrow, well weighted (the primitive form of aeration!). At that time this latter was horse-drawn, the animal wearing shoes to prevent turf damage. It worked first north to south then east to west, but, Macself added, 'when this work can be done by hand rollers, so much the better.'

"The importance of aeration of established turf has always been recognized. Quite primitive aerators, sometimes home-made by driving long nails through a piece of wood and attaching a handle, were used throughout the 19th century, and can still be made and used today.

"Between these and strange contraptions similar to the enormous spiked rollers, there has been a variety of design. In 1930, Sarel's spiked rollers were advertised. They were made in sections 30 cm (1') long and 22 cm (9") in diameter and each section was fitted with 90 spikes, so that a 90 cm (3') roller carried 270 spikes and punctured a standard tennis court 288,000 times. This was the forerunner of the modern aerators of the '40s, '50s, 60s and on.

"Such is the history of the modern lawn, or institutional turf as we know it today."

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Art Drysdale, a life-long resident of Toronto and a horticulturist well known all across Canada, is now a resident of Parksville, British Columbia on Vancouver Island, just north of Nanaimo. He is renovating an old home and will build a new garden there. He is heard Saturdays from 8:05 to 10 AM, with a live radio broadcast on Toronto's powerful and clear, AM740 CHWO Primetime Radio.

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