The environmentalist case for well-manicured lawns

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With summer now under way, homeowners across the land are out tending their lawns. But many can't help mowing, fertilizing or – heaven forbid – applying pesticides and herbicides without experiencing a vague sense of guilt.

Grass these days is distinctly out of fashion. Once glorified as a symbol of civic order, the lawn is now demonized as an example of the gross wastefulness of Western society. To urbanists, it stands for bland suburban uniformity, an anachronism in a day when smart Jane Jacobs cities strive for density and diversity. To the green movement, it is a sterile monoculture, sucking up fertilizers and water while polluting the earth with mower fumes and chemical run-off.

Greenpeace has declared that "a lawn is an unnatural ecosystem," advising homeowners to "plant flowers, trees, bushes, ground cover and vegetables instead of grass." The Sierra Club laments that Americans use 100 million pounds of pesticides and herbicides a year, and that "some of these chemicals leach into the groundwater, pollute the air, and get onto the skin and into the mouths of our children, pets, and other creatures."

In Calgary, a citizens group lobbying for a lawn-chemical ban urges homeowners to replace their grass lawns with "xeriscapes," landscaping that uses native and drought-resistant plants instead of the non-native Kentucky bluegrass that makes up most lawns in northern North America.

In her 2009 book *Lawn Wars: the Struggle for a New Lawn Ethic*, U.S. author Lois B. Robbins calls lawns an "ecological catastrophe" and argues that "our love affair with the lawn is drawing to a close."

Before accepting this indictment on its face, pause for a minute to listen to a witness for the defence.

Alan White is no scientist. He holds no degrees. But he does know grass. As the owner of a 10-employee lawn-care company in Burlington, 45 minutes down the highway from Toronto, he has been studying it for more than two decades.

In that time, he has come to love the lowly plant with a boyish passion, calling it a "photosynthesizing, oxygen-producing, carbon-sequestering miracle."

When others look at a golf course or a suburban lawn, they see a blank green carpet. He sees something different: a living, breathing organism that can help, not hurt the environment – as long as we learn to treat it right.

In his office this week, with a smile on his face and a gleam in his eye, he spoke about it for two straight hours, barely drawing breath as he explained how wrong the world is about grass and how badly we neglect it.

Now 45, he grew up in the the green landscape of the Niagara Escarpment, working on an orchard and at a Burlington golf course and becoming enthralled by the sights and smells.

"Anybody who has golfed early in the morning sees this haze and dew that is coming off the land. That's the plants breathing."

Only later, when he started Turf Systems Inc., did he learn how a lawn actually works and what it can do – that one of average size does as much good for the air as two mature maple trees. The oxygen it produces alone is enough for a family of four.

Partly because of its stable roots, grass absorbs and holds climate-warming carbon. One study found that even a lawn given minimal care can take in as much carbon as an equivalent forested area. Another part of the reason is the sheer number of shoots that an average lawn produces: six per square inch and 85 per square foot, or about 8.5 million in a 10,000-square-foot plot. Using satellite data, a scientist for NASA's Earth Observatory estimated that if Americans left their grass clipping on the lawn to decompose, as many homeowners now do, U.S. lawns could store 37 billion pounds of carbon a year.

Grass is an excellent filter, too. Its dense, fibrous root system absorbs and cleans water. It prevents the erosion and runoff that are one of the main sources of pollution in Canadian waterways. A well-tended lawn absorbs rainfall six times more effectively than a wheat field. "It traps all the stuff the rainwater picked up before it hits our storm sewers," Mr. White says.