



# The LAWN

A History of  
an American  
OBSESSION

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Sears, Roebuck catalogs differed widely from region to region and from year to year. In 1910, the freight edition of the spring catalog offered four types of lawn mowers. The least expensive, at \$2.35, was "especially recommended for lawns too small to justify a higher priced machine." The most expensive mower, at \$6.95, was recommended as "the very mower for large lawns, public squares, parks, charitable institutions, suburban and country homes, rough new lawns and heavy work generally, but is equally as well adapted for ordinary home use." The catalog offered adjustable grass catchers, lawn swings and settees, and several types of lawn fencing. Kenwood fencing was described as "a handsome and substantial lawn fencing which easily adds twice its cost to the value and beauty of a home.... closely woven and strictly poultry proof."<sup>44</sup> Fences were still important for keeping animals off the lawn around the house in rural areas, as ha-has and picket fences had been in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No lawn rollers or sprinklers were listed in this edition. (It is curious that the spring catalog for 1924 and the spring-summer catalog for 1925 included no lawn tools or lawn-related items.)

One of the companies to realize the potential market provided by the vision of a nation of front lawns was the O. M. Scott and Sons hardware and seed company of Marysville, Ohio. In the 1870's, Scott's seed-cleaning operation for his own crops was such a success that his neighbors began asking him to clean their seed.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the century Scott was selling his hardware customers weed-free seed as a sideline. In 1906, responding to competition from mail-order firms, the Scotts started their own mail-order seed business, serving Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Virginia. Among the seed supplied was Kentucky bluegrass, used for pastures, meadows, and hay. Ten years later, an order for 5,000 pounds of bluegrass seed received from the Brentwood golf club on Long Island finally alerted the firm to the business potential of top-quality grass seed for turf. The Long Island club was pleased with its weed-free fairways and told other clubs about Scott. The turf seed business expanded, O. M. Scott and Sons gave up the hardware

business to concentrate on grass, and in 1921 Scott claimed one in every five golf courses in the United States as a seed customer.<sup>46</sup>

Scott and Sons began to advertise in popular magazines in the late twenties. Scott advertisements for creeping bent lawn grass reflected the achievements of the USDA and the USGA turf research programs. An advertisement in *House Beautiful* trumpeted to the reader,

Scott's Creeping Bent for Perfect Lawns! Sod in six weeks! A rich, velvety stretch of lawn that chokes out weeds before they can grow! A deep, thick, uniform turf that makes your home a beauty spot! That's what you'll get if you plant Scott's Creeping Bent. The New Super-Lawn. Creeping Bent—long recognized as the ideal grass for golf putting greens—is now producing Super Lawns. Instead of sowing seed, you plant stolons or the chopped grass—and in a few weeks you have a luxuriant lawn like the deep green pile of a turkish carpet!<sup>47</sup>

Scott and Sons became one of the largest and best-known companies in the lawn industry in the thirties and forties. Drawing on its mail-order experience, the company was able to start a direct mail advertising campaign using a newsletter titled *Lawn Care*. The first of these little “service publications” was mailed in August 1928 to a list of five thousand addresses. The company built up its mailing list through magazine advertisements that encouraged the reader to send in a coupon for a free subscription to *Lawn Care*. Scott hoped that successful lawn makers would become turf evangelists in their neighborhoods and influence their neighbors by example to want to grow better lawns.<sup>48</sup>

Another strategy for increasing the mailing list was to target golfers. In about 1930, Edgar Guest published the poem “The Proof of a Golfer.” The Scott Company received permission to reprint the poem and offered golf clubs copies suitable for posting on clubhouse bulletin boards. It also offered to send reprints to every club member if given the

club membership list. In a few weeks the company obtained "the names of 165,000 potential lawn seed buyers with their home addresses, all of them golfers with an eye for good turf."<sup>49</sup> By 1961, the subscription list for *Lawn Care* exceeded four million.

Mass-circulation magazines that relied on revenue from advertisers rather than readers' subscriptions were part of the information revolution of the early twentieth century. Magazine advertising proved to be cheaper and more effective than trade cards, and popular magazines reached a wider audience than the horticulture and seed catalogs and a more affluent and more urban audience than the Sears, Roebuck or Montgomery Ward catalogs.<sup>50</sup> Advances in the printing industry made it possible to include photographic illustrations, first in black and white and then in color, in these publications at a price that almost everyone could afford. Magazines were published for many different audiences, including women, children, suburban homeowners, and people with interests in science, fashion, film stars, and a variety of hobbies. They were also produced to appeal to various economic and social groups. Successful magazines gathered audiences ready to buy consumer goods advertised in the correct surroundings and in the proper fashion.

Advertisers were quick to make use of these innovations. They were able to target specific audiences by choosing to advertise in different types of magazines rather than by relying on local merchants to distribute trade cards to their customers. Advertisements could be displayed in many ways in the magazines: in color and in black and white, using photographs, drawings, and text in various sizes. Advertisements and articles on lawn care generally appeared in magazines devoted to the home and to gardening and addressed a new middle class of increasingly well-educated, white-collar homeowners.

During the 1890's, only *Scientific American* carried articles on lawn care. Most were reviews of specific mowers and mower attachments. One was entitled "Fertilizer for Velvety Lawns," another treated lawns and tennis grounds. At the