

The Great American Lawn: How the Dream Was Manufactured

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America's manicured front lawns represent the pride of homeownership, and the cultivation of community. But the ways we maintain them risk hurting the environment and contributing to climate change. So why do we even have lawns in the first place? We traced their history, starting with early European colonists.

Below, you'll find some of the sources that helped us the most and other tidbits we weren't able to fit into the video.

Selected Sources and Further Reading

- There are two books that offer robust overviews of lawns in American culture. First, is Virginia Scott Jenkins' "The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession" which begins all the way back in colonial times.

Ted Steinberg's "American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn" focuses mostly on the 20th century, and includes a chapter on golf's role in lawn development. He also provides data on the relationship of lawns to the environment and climate change.

- Speaking of climate data, in 2005, NASA published this report on a quest to quantify how much area lawns take up in the United States.
- Advertisements called trade cards were instrumental in promoting lawn equipment. One of the biggest influences on their development was printer Louis Prang. But, as the New-York Historical Society writes, he's also known

for being the “father of the American Christmas card.”

Prang’s company was famous earlier for printing maps of Civil War battles. You can see some here at the Library of Congress.

- The video mentions Frank J. Scott’s 1870 book “The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds,” and its impact on lawn care. Here’s a link to all 702 pages of the book if you want to see what all the 19th-century fuss was about.
- Near the end of the video, we discuss housing discrimination toward people of color in 1950s suburbia. The man shown watering his lawn is William Myers, a World War II veteran who faced racist attacks after buying a home in Levittown, Pa. Here’s more about what happened.

More Lawn Coverage from the Times

- The Times’ “Climate Fwd:” newsletter published some tips on how to lessen your lawn care’s environmental impact.
- Our Real Estate columnist Ronda Kaysen explained why she’s done mowing her lawn.
- If you do mow your lawn, here’s a way to practice meditation as you go.
- Finally, as mentioned in the video, here’s The Times’ coverage of former President Theodore Roosevelt mowing his lawn in 1914.