

The Strange Psychology of the American Lawn

Why are we so obsessed with our lawns, and why does it matter?

Posted February 12, 2020 | Reviewed by Chloe Williams



Source: Lisa Fotios/Pexels

In 2016, in an Illinois town called Cahokia, a woman was taken to jail. Her [crime](#)? She [failed](#) to mow her lawn. In 2019, a Florida man was [fined](#) \$30,000 by the city of Dunedin for allowing his grass to grow more than 10 inches in height.

These examples, while extreme, speak to our strange relationship with our lawns. Why do we care so much about these rather unexciting grasses? What might this odd preoccupation tell us about our own psychology?

First, it's worth appreciating the degree of our investment in lawns. A 2005 [study](#) estimated that turf grasses (lawns, parks, [athletic](#) fields, etc) cover over 40 million acres in the continental U.S., an area "three times larger than any irrigated crop." And, as described in a recent Freakonomics [episode](#), Americans spend as much as \$60 billion a year to maintain this grass. These impressive statistics are the result of several centuries of rising commitment to growing and tending to these patches of greenery.

As described by historian Yuval Noah Harari in his book, *Homo Deus*, "the idea of nurturing a lawn at the entrance to private residences was born in the castles of French and English aristocrats in the late Middle Ages." Historically, lawns were a symbol of high status, as only those with considerable wealth could muster the resources needed to maintain these opulent displays.

In the modern day, lawns have trickled down from the estates of the ultra-wealthy to the front yards of the middle class. Across America, millions of families now proudly present their grass to their neighbors and drivers by carefully weeding, watering, fertilizing and mowing these small-scale representations of the palatial grounds that spawned the idea centuries ago.

With this context in mind, it's easy to see why a well-manicured lawn is tethered to ideas like success and stability. The relative health and attractiveness of the grass in our yard becomes a barometer for our life as a whole. In this way, cultivating a healthy, neatly mowed lawn helps us convince others we're doing well. This is supported by a [2013 survey](#), in which people reported most strongly that an attractive lawn reflected positively on them.

By definition, lawns are grasses maintained at a short length for aesthetic or recreational purposes. And while rather bland in comparison to other plants, they nevertheless represent one of our most consistent exposures to and engagements with nature. This might seem a net positive, as modern humans certainly suffer from a general lack of greenery. But our careful cultivation of this natural element is better viewed through a more critical lens.

In a 1989 [article](#) in *The New York Times Magazine*, "Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns," Michael Pollan describes lawns as emblematic of a "skewed relationship to the land," adding, "they teach us that, with the help of petrochemicals and technology, we can bend nature to our will." In this sense, lawns are localized order within the chaos of the natural world. Over a few hundred square feet, we fend off entropy, exerting totalitarian rule over a couple of vertical inches of vegetation.

Using lawns to create an illusion of order or to inflate a sense of personal success suggests they can act as psychological buffers. Like moats around castles, our neatly tended yards become barriers between the worlds we create inside our home and the hardness of reality outside. And while the downside risk of these types of mental stories may not seem significant by

itself, the damage associated with lawn maintenance is more than just psychological.

With so many acres covered in cultivated grass, the associated ecological consequences are of significant concern. To begin, lawn grass requires massive amounts of resources to sustain. The USDA estimates that lawns account for about [half](#) of homeowner water use, much of which is wasted. Additionally, Americans are [reported](#) to use 80 million pounds of fertilizers and pesticides on their lawns each year. Perhaps of even more import, the particles generated by lawnmowers are a [major source](#) of toxic, carcinogenic air pollution.

These surprising data mean we need to question whether lawns provide us with enough benefit to justify their widespread existence. This idea becomes increasingly relevant in the context of viable lawn alternatives like gardens, low-maintenance groundcovers, and more generally, xeriscaping—a water conserving landscape technique that, in addition to its eco-friendly aspects, can be much more cost-effective than a traditional lawn.

Lawns will likely continue represent the go-to option in American yards for years to come. But it's time we re-evaluate this unnatural obsession. Sure, we can argue the need for grass on a golf course or in a football stadium, but when it comes to our own backyards, we should consider questioning our preoccupation, asking whether our psychological constructs are getting in the way of better options.

About the Author



[Austin Perlmutter, M.D.](#), is a board-certified internal medicine physician and the co-author of *Brain Wash*.