



# Out of fashion: Green lawns

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By **Laura Vanderkam**



By Keith Simmons, USA TODAY

Diane Faulkner's lawn was always causing her trouble. This [Jacksonville, Fla.](#), resident traveled frequently, and in her absence, her thirsty, fussy grass would go brown or otherwise run afoul of her neighborhood association's rules. She hated returning home to a \$50 fine, but the last straw was when her travels took her to rural [Kenya](#). Immersed in local life, she'd wake up at dawn with the villagers to walk miles along a dried-up river toward a water source, then return with a few gallons for cooking and washing.

"That was their whole morning," she says. As soon as she got on the plane back to America, she had a thought: "How many gallons of water do I waste on that stinking lawn?" And more broadly, why did she even have a lawn in the first place?

It's a question a growing number of sweaty Americans are asking as they push (or ride) their lawnmowers in the August heat. While a field of green, closely cropped grass is the default landscape for a "nice" neighborhood, there's no reason it has to be. And there are plenty of reasons

it shouldn't be — at least if we value the planet and our time.

## 21 million acres

Historians aren't exactly sure why lawns became as closely tied to the American dream as homeownership itself. Perhaps early suburban sorts wished to mimic the look of British castle grounds (minus the sheep that were responsible for the close cropping). The fad spread, the lawn care industry grew, and now [21 million acres](#) of the USA are covered with grasses that wouldn't grow well here if left to their own devices.

The fight to maintain this unnatural state exacts a toll. "It's essentially like pushing a boulder up a hill," notes Ted Steinberg, an environmental historian at [Case Western Reserve University](#) and author of *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn*.

According to Stephen Kress of the [National Audubon Society](#), homeowners apply [78 million pounds of pesticides](#) a year to lawns, often to kill "weeds" such as dandelions and clover, perhaps not noticing that these plants look just as green as grass when you mow them.

Mowing itself requires fuel, just like our cars, with a similar impact on the environment. And all these woes are before you even get to the issue of water. According to Kress, maintaining non-native plants requires 10,000 gallons of water per year per lawn, over and above rainwater. That water doesn't just

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show up by itself; it requires energy to get to your hose. In California, for example, the energy required to treat and move water amounts to [19% of total electricity use](#) in the state.

In short, lawns are incredibly inefficient, and not just from an environmental perspective. Maintenance requires time and money, which people usually claim are in short supply. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey, the average father of school-aged kids spends 1.6 hours a week on lawn and garden care — more time than he spends on reading, talking, playing or doing educational activities with his kids combined.

### Shaming away a trend

For all these reasons, there's a growing backlash against suburban seas of green. "The perfect lawn is in peril," reports Steinberg. Big chunks of Canada have banned certain lawn pesticides. In the U.S., municipalities such as Los Angeles and Raleigh, N. C., regulate how many times a week homeowners can turn on the sprinklers.

That said, while rationing water during droughts has merit, I don't think policymakers should start regulating lawns broadly. Deploying inspectors to count the square footage of grass vs. wild plants is a waste of resources when states are cutting teachers and cops. The best approach is for all of us to start thinking of lawns as a fashion — a fashion like wearing the feathers of rare birds in hats was once a fashion. Fashions can change when enough people decide they are ridiculous or wasteful. Few parents would light a cigarette at a playground anymore, even if it's not illegal, and we should start treating the presence of a vast, green, cropped grass lawn in the middle of summer the same way: as a weird and antisocial thing.

Certainly, there are options.

"You don't have to trade off the lawn for some hideous alternative," notes Penny Lewis, executive director of the Ecological Landscaping Association. First, ask "how much lawn do you have and how much do you really need?"

Some homeowners keep a small patch of grass around the house and turn parts of the lawn into a meadow that attracts birds and butterflies. Others simply swear off pesticides and let the grass go

dormant in the summer.

Faulkner, on the other hand, went all-in. She redid her lawn with rocks and hearty plants such as Confederate Jasmine, arranged to look like an English garden. Because all her plants grow well in Florida, they require no upkeep. "I don't have to mow, I don't have to water, I don't have to trim," she reports. Her water bill has gone from \$80-\$90/month to \$20.

Her only lawn headache now? Figuring out what to do with the time and money she's saving — a problem let's hope more homeowners have soon.

*Laura Vanderkam, author of 168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think, is a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors.*

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