

a voice
for the natural
landscaping
movement



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What's On the Horizon? The Future of Natural Landscaping in America

By Neil Diboll

On the last day of the Annual Meeting, a Sunday morning, the closing plenary thoughts were delivered by the keynote speaker, and newly nominated Honorary Director, Neil Diboll, with enthusiastic audience participation, in what turned out to be a heady consciousness-raising meeting. You should have been there.

Which brings us to why oil and water will strongly influence the future of the American Landscape. The four largest crops in America, not necessarily in order of total acreage, are: Corn, soybeans, wheat, and lawn. That's a lot of lawn. And what does it require to maintain all this lawn? Energy and water.

Lawn and Energy

It has been calculated that the average American lawn receives four times the volume of chemical applications as an average farm field. And where do these fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides, and the like come from? Most pesticides are derived from petrochemicals. The production of nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers is extremely energy intensive. Add to that the trucking costs for delivery around the country; and then there is the additional energy cost of hauling away the product of all the fertilizing – the lawn clippings to the landfill or community compost pile.



Celebrating 25 years
restoring native plants
and natural landscapes.

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And of course, mowing all that lawn requires a lot of gasoline. People are beginning to balk at paying \$4 a gallon to fill up their mowers.

Lawn and Air Pollution

It has been estimated that 25 percent of the air pollution in the state of California is generated by two-cycle engines, primarily lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and other lawn care machinery. The “Mow, Blow, and Go” landscape practices they support contribute significantly to the compromised air quality that so characterizes many urban areas in the western United States where photochemical smog is often a problem.

The inescapable fact is that we simply will not be able to afford to maintain large expanses of lawn in the future, both economically and environmentally.

Why the Preoccupation with Lawn in America? A Short History

Taking an anthropological viewpoint, it is likely that humans have long preferred an open landscape around their dwellings. This allows us to readily determine who might be entering our territory, be they friend or foe. The lawn serves this purpose nicely. You can't hide in 2-inch tall turf. Mowed lawn can provide a sense of security, both tactically and socially.

Lawn was also a status symbol in England in the 18th and 19th centuries. Only the wealthy owned land and could afford to pay the gardeners that were required to maintain a lawn. With the rise of the American middle class in the late 19th century, and the development of mechanized mowing machines, possessing a lawn became an economic reality for thousands of homeowners. Now, they too, could emulate the lifestyle of wealthy Europeans.

It is easy to see how the great landscape designer Frederick Law Olmsted conceived of the lawn as the “great democratizer” of the landscape. The fenced properties of Europe were viewed by some landscape architects of that time as separating people from one another: neighbor from neighbor, American from fellow American. The lawn presented an opportunity to create free, unbroken expanses stretching across property lines and class lines in the fresh new suburbs of a rising nation. The very concept of “lawn” was associated with the closely held American values of freedom and upward social mobility.

So when your neighbors frown upon your “messy” and “weedy” natural landscape, they are probably not reacting solely from the standpoint of imposing their landscape taste upon their neighbor. Those of us who are so bold as to violate the unspoken “Social Covenant of the Lawn” are actually assailing the bedrock values that most Americans hold dear: Social class and assimilation into



the greater society. The planting of a prairie in your front yard is not merely a landscaping sin – it is an affront to the greater group, their shared values, and sense of propriety. In some suburban circles the planting of prairie is actually viewed as a serious social *faux pas* – it requires that action be taken by the authorities to restore the proper landscape order. Lawn is also the perfect example of our need to control and dominate nature. Don't let that grass grow up to its natural height. Keep

those pesky weeds at bay. And by all means, don't let those bugs find a home in your yard.

In Olmsted's day, lawns were not maintained with a witch's brew of chemicals and loud, smoking machines. The environmental impact of the lawn of a hundred years ago was relatively light. We didn't have the technological know-how to poison our back yards and water resources back then. The scream of the power mower was not yet available to shatter the sacred silence of a weekend morning. We had yet to progress to the sophisticated level of landscape maintenance that we enjoy today.

Despite our evolutionary attraction to a low-growing landscape around our settlements and the allegedly egalitarian social aspect of the lawn, it is not the answer to every landscape situation. Outside the “territorial safety zone” of our homes and buildings, we have the opportunity to create wilder, more diverse, and healthier landscapes. If these landscapes should conveniently require less maintenance and less money, we now have the answer to many a landscape dream.

An ecologically sound, economically-attractive alternative to mowing the lawn would be welcomed by a host of home-owning weekend warriors, not to mention the cost-conscious captains of corporate America. And what native-plant community is best suited to the wide open spaces presently claimed by the lawns of America? None other than the nearly-extirpated North American prairie.



The Future

Do we dare to hope that people are finally coming to their senses? Now that the “Era of Cheap Energy” is over, will the citizens of our land finally embrace the values of conservation and stewardship? As with almost all human endeavors, change comes painfully and usually as a result of economic forces. The only thing that has

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gotten people to give up their gas guzzlers is the high price of gas.

The only force that will increasingly push people toward living more sustainable and ecological lifestyles is the increasing cost of pushing nature around. As the price of gasoline, fertilizers, and pesticides increases, the lawn begins to look like a luxury. When it hurts your pocketbook to fill up your riding mower, then more prairies may be on the horizon.

We all know the compelling reasons for planting sustainable, native landscapes: Land and water conservation, wildlife habitat, flood control, reduced chemicals in the environment, lower water consumption, reduced costs, and dynamic, living ecosystems that soothe the soul. But what single other factor may eventually trump all of these benefits? Carbon.

Consider the carbon footprint of the prairie versus the lawn. The amount of energy required to maintain a lawn is astronomical. When you total up the energy required to mow the outdoor carpet weekly, fertilize it two to four times a year, and de-pestify, defungify and de-weed it, it really adds up.

And the carbon footprint of the prairie? Almost negligible. No fertilizers, no fungicides, perhaps an occasional spot application of herbicide to control a wayward weed, and an annual mowing or biennial burning. The only carbon that comes off the prairie is the smoke from a spring burn. And that carbon is soon absorbed back by the plants during the growing season and converted into new leaves, shoots, and roots.

Prairies are actually net carbon sinks, since much of the carbon dioxide they extract from the air goes into their roots. The average prairie plant has about two thirds of its living biomass underground in its root systems. Approximately one third of the root mass of the average prairie grass dies back every year, adding organic matter to the soil and sequestering carbon from the atmosphere.

All that rich, black soil in what is now the Corn Belt is the accumulation of thousands of years of carbon dioxide, extracted from the atmosphere by solar powered prairie plants. Even though the above-ground biomass of prairie plant – the leaves and stems – is released back into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide through prairie burns or by microbial breakdown, the net effect is that the prairie sequesters more carbon than it releases from year to year, thanks to the exceptional root systems of its many flowers and grasses.

And that may be one of the most compelling reasons to plant prairies and other native plant communities that we will ever have. But ultimately, the decision as to how to landscape our homes,



Above: A good example of a “no mow” lawn owned by Bill Sloey. For more details and information on “no mow” lawns see “So You Want a ‘No Mow’ Lawn” at www.for-wild.org/download/wantnomow/wantnomow.html.

offices, and parks will come down largely to economics. When it simply becomes too expensive to pay for the fuel and water required to maintain the energy-intensive luxury lawn – (ever notice that the turf fertilizer advertisers always refer to a *luxurious* lawn?) – then new alternatives will be implemented.

We are slowly starting to see more and more people opting for a native landscape with greatly reduced life-cycle costs, compared to more expensive lawns. The

average annual cost of a manicured lawn over a 20-year period is between three and 20 times that of a prairie (depending upon whether the lawn is established by seed or sod, the level of annual maintenance, and whether an irrigation system was installed). As the cost to support this two-dimensional ecological desert continues to increase, simple economics will dictate that viable alternatives must be found.

However, prairie is not the answer to every landscape application.

One obviously would not want to plant a prairie right up to the house, especially if burning is the preferred method of management. There are other solutions for areas where lawn is preferable, due to the proximity to buildings, shaded conditions, or alternative uses. (It’s pretty tough to play croquet in the prairie.)

For these situations, many people are seeding a “No Mow” fescue lawn mix. This blend of slow-growing turf varieties is derived from native fescue grasses. It requires little or no fertilizing, is more drought resistant than bluegrass, and has an innate ability to crowd out many weeds. It also has the ability to grow in shady conditions, and tolerates higher salt levels than most other turf grasses. For situations that do not call for the planting of a prairie, this is an excellent alternative to the high-maintenance, costly lawns that consume our precious energy and water resources.

As we come to terms with the new realities of limited oil, water, and other resources, it is inevitable that ecologically sustainable landscapes will replace the old, high-maintenance lawns of the past. Perhaps our future status symbols will be based not on how much we consume, but on how little impact we each have on our planet. Instead of measuring success by how large a house we own, or how big a vehicle we drive, social status will be awarded based upon how little of the Earth’s bounty we consume. Maybe, just maybe, we will someday be measured in terms of how much of the world’s resources and natural beauty we preserve for future generations. Now that’s a horizon I can look forward to seeing. ♣