

A (very) brief history of lawns

Second in a series on lawns by Michael R. Barnes, Ph.D.

THE LAWN AS A CONCEPT is both mundane and at the same time so complex that its existence is a riddle of our own making. The dichotomy, or better said, the tension between the mundane and complex has produced volumes of work from the most highly precise genetic experiments to the most confrontational works of poetry and art. Why this tension?

Lawns fade into the background of our activities *except* when they disrupt them. For example, we might not think

about the species of grass and how it's maintained when we're strolling around on it, except if there are dead patches, or puddles due to low spots after a hard rain. The riddle of the lawn is that they can as easily be the star or just another unnamed cast member. But how did we get to this place, where did lawns come from and why are they seemingly everywhere? Let's dive into an abbreviated history of lawns.



Image 1: Photograph of artist Jane Alexander's 'Security/Segurança,' and sculpture *Bird* (2006), displayed in the excellent book *Civillising Grass* by Jonathan Cane (© 2018 Jane Alexander/DALRO. Photo by: Juan Guerra.)

The best place to start is to define exactly what we mean by the word *lawn*. There have been numerous definitions and iterations of what exactly a lawn is, but for our purposes we'll work with lawns as: spaces of cultivated short-grass, and potentially other short-growing species, that are not used for production (e.g., agricultural or pastoral) to distinguish them from spaces like meadows or pastures. Two key aspects of lawns also emerge from this definition: (1) lawns need care and attention in both their establishment and their ongoing maintenance, and (2) they are created for human use and pleasure. The word *lawn* first appeared in English in the mid-1500s, and the specific history of the word itself is debated, given the multiple and overlapping sources. For example, origins for the word can be traced separately to Breton (*lann*), middle English (*launde*), and old French (*laund*). If you're interested in additional detail related to the etymology of the word *lawn* and its historical roots

and meaning, several interesting books and papers tackle the subject. Two great sources on this are Tom Fort's *The Grass is Greener* and *The American Lawn*, by George Teysot.

With a working definition of lawns, we can begin to unpack where they came from and how they spread. While the specific word *lawn* may not have been in use in medieval times, the earliest lawns as an intentional landscape certainly did exist in a variety of typologies. The earliest likely form of lawns originated in northern Europe and was highly practical: grassy expanses used for gathering spaces and to enhance the defense of castles and fortifications.



Image 2: Urquhart Castle, near Inverness, Scotland. A trimmed area (e.g., lawn) for defensive purposes surrounds the main structures. (Photo by Michael R. Barnes)

Both uses involved the clearing of all taller vegetation (e.g., trees, bushes) to leave behind a much shorter vegetative palette. This allowed for freer movement of people and space for them to congregate in and greatly improved sightlines to spot potential threats. From this era, lawns became more formalized and cultivated in various ways. Most formal lawns at this point were found predominantly in elaborate gardens of the wealthy and surrounding monasteries and churches, hardly the accessible greenspaces of today. Nonetheless, as early as 1260 there were instructions on how to create one's own grassy plots (see Ignatieva et al. 2018, p.30).

From the formative years in medieval times, the lawn literally started its sprawl across our landscapes, with preferences for open landscaping styles popularized in 18th-century England. These landscapes included open greenspaces of lawns and short cut meadows with natural or built water bodies (e.g., lakes, ponds). Village greens, intended for the gathering of livestock to graze safely and eventually for local people to gather, also fit into this category. One crucial factor is important to mention in the period after the spread of lawns but pre-proliferation: the formalization of breeding and cultivation of turfgrass species and varieties. This allowed for the selection of different species, or varieties within species, for valuable characteristics such as height, density, and texture. This process was critical for the development of the later, industrialized turfgrass lawn.

The spread of the lawn we as we know it today coincided with the rise of modern cities and the design and development of public parks in Europe. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as people left farming communities and cities swelled, we see the importance of, or in some cases a demand for, access to green space for urban dwellers away from their dense, noisy, and often unwholesome living accommodations. Examples of parks created out of this demand include Kensal Green in



Image 3: An example of a common postwar neighborhood (in modern times) with a standard street setback with front yards dominated by turfgrass lawns. (Photo by: Michael R. Barnes)

London, South Park in Chicago, and Central Park in New York City. The lawn was an ideal ground cover to accommodate growing numbers of urban dwellers and thus became the foundation of urban parks. To borrow a current phrase, this growth of urban areas, and with them urban parks, made lawns go viral.

And then, in the post-WW2 era, the modern lawn emerged as new suburbs burgeoned, with every home having its own little piece of nature that mimicked the public park aesthetic. Hence the presence of swaths of lawns in so many places. Along with lawns precipitating across multiple landscapes and around the world came the need to maintain such spaces with extensive developments in lawn maintenance and management – i.e., mowers, fertilizers, and practices to achieve the ideal lawn. The post-WW2 lawn readily evolved into the formalized and industrialized lawn we see today, with established regimes involving mowing, re-seeding, and the application of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides. A great read related to lawn technologies is Warren Schultz’s *A Man’s Turf: The Perfect Lawn*, which gives you a look at the history and development of the lawn mower over time.

There’s one more question I want to address before we end our discussion of the history of lawns: Why do they persist? One short answer from a historical perspective is simply that they’ve been functioning so well for so long. While we might think of them as a modern invention, a wholly manmade version of “natural” landscape, we have seen that the lawn, in one form or another, has been around for centuries. Lawns have become the default urban

greenspace ground cover and have staying power due to that status. However, tension exists between changing social attitudes – primarily related to climate change and strained resources – and the long history of utility that will keep lawns as the dominant form of urban greenspace for years to come. I will address this complexity in my next article.

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