


OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

The Era of the American Lawn Is Over

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By Ken Ilgunas

Mr. Ilgunas is from New York State and lives in Scotland. He wrote from Drayton, England.

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When I moved from the United States to Britain in 2018, one of the first differences I noticed was the lawns. I went from Wheatfield, a suburban town in western New York between Niagara Falls and Buffalo, where more or less every home had an indistinguishable patch of green that was sprayed annually, cut weekly and watered sometimes daily.

But in front of the duplex suburban houses in East Linton, a small village in Scotland east of Edinburgh, where I bought a home, some lawns weren't really lawns at all. These yards of shrubs, trees and flowering weeds were more like living mosaics — shaggy, distinct and alive with bugs and birdsong. They required neither insecticide nor mower.

In the seven years since, the proportion of unkempt lawns seems to have only grown. While Britons still have their share of turf grass lawns (albeit usually a small fraction of the size of their American counterparts), many British homeowners embrace wildlife or no-mow gardening — an approach that reduces

labor and chemical use, celebrates aesthetic untidiness and welcomes biodiversity. Call it a postcolonial irony: Britons have kept their king but are free to let their gardens grow wild, while Americans continue to bow and scrape to a green tyrant.

In another irony, it was rich Britons in the 17th and 18th centuries who were — at least partly — responsible for popularizing lawns in the first place. Which makes me wonder: If Americans got the idea from the British, maybe we could take inspiration again, this time for something wilder, freer and more alive.



Jack Kenyon for The New York Times



Jack Kenyon for The New York Times

In June I traveled south to the village of Drayton (population: around 380) in the Somerset Levels, a low-lying wetland in southwestern England, near the neck of Cornwall. Drayton is known for its apples and wassailing, a midwinter folk tradition in which some of the villagers go door to door singing traditional

blessings, collecting money for charity and getting tipsy on cider. I'd gone to see the gardens of locals participating in No-Mow May, a campaign organized by Plantlife, a conservation charity.

The narrow roads leading into Drayton are flanked by tall hedgerows and lined with homes built from blue Lias stone, a limestone quarried in Somerset. The village has a distinctively British aesthetic, its architectural order softened by unruly greenery. On an early summer day, daisies burst from cracks in the sidewalk, bean vines climbed trellises in front gardens, and zucchini sprouted on a street corner. Beyond the village, verges were being allowed to grow wild until their September clipping. Many gardens featured bushy borders and meadowlike lawns in which narrow paths had been carved to let visitors wander.



Peter Jackson, a resident of Drayton, England. Jack Kenyon for The New York Times

Penny Covington, 72, a retired financial adviser, had let about two-thirds of her enormous garden (approximately 30,000 square feet, half the size of a football field) grow wild, for ecological and aesthetic reasons.

“I just plunk things in,” Ms. Covington said of her approach, as I followed her through a network of pathways she’d mowed through grass taller than Skipper, her working retriever, who bounded behind us. We ducked under elderflower trees heavy with delicate flowers, which she turns into cordial, and wandered past valerian, lavender, potato beds and beehives filled with swarms she’d named after her friends Eddie, Chris and Maggie. And she pointed to “some sort of poppy” that had seeded itself in an unmown patch of grass and wildflowers.

I said I was surprised by how little effort her garden seemed to require and the fact that she didn’t know the names of more of her plants, given that it was one of the most aesthetically and ecologically impressive gardens I’d ever seen.

“You don’t need to be an expert. You just need to enjoy it,” she said. “Sometimes I think, ‘Oh, what have I got down here?’ I love being surprised because you’re never quite sure what’s there,” adding that she once found an adder, a slow worm — a legless lizard — and a mouse living together in her compost heap.



Jack Kenyon for The New York Times



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Jack Kenyon for The New York Times

There's no definitive count of how many gardens in Britain are managed like Ms. Covington's, but Plantlife works with 95 British counties and has more than 5,000 households registered in support of No Mow May. And some of Britain's celebrity gardeners — most notably Monty Don, a writer and a host of "Gardeners' World" — are in favor of ensuring lawns are at least a little shaggy. He even debuted this aesthetic this year at the Chelsea Flower Show, the country's most prestigious gardening event and a reliable barometer of changing tastes.

So if the manicured lawns of Britain's past are giving way to a more disheveled future, could America's go wild, too?



"Oak Lawn, Illinois," 2006. The "perfect order and neatness" of an American lawn. Grga Štimac

I grew up surrounded by a sea of turf. We had a big, empty lawn, front and back. My boyhood friends and I played football, extending our makeshift field into a neighbor's lawn and using driveways as end zones, and I remember taking pleasure in mowing perfect rows, shirtless on a summer day. But for 99 percent of its life, our suburban lawn served no practical, recreational, agricultural or ecological purpose. Its aesthetic appeal, to put it kindly, was limited. Even back then I wondered if we owned the lawn or if the lawn owned us.

The lawn as we know it today — which is more like an emerald green outdoor carpet than anything found in nature — started to take shape in the 17th and 18th centuries among wealthy, aristocratic Britons and French, who cultivated

expansive, manicured grassy areas as a symbol of status and refinement. In those early days, only the very rich could afford laborers to hand-cut grass using scythes — an “outrageous act of ostentation,” as an article in “Gardens Illustrated” put it.

In the United States some Americans, like Thomas Jefferson, with their wealth and slave labor, adopted similarly ostentatious gardens. And in 1840s a landscape designer, Andrew Jackson Downing, published “A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening, Adapted to North America.” “The most perfect order and neatness,” he wrote, “should reign throughout.”

But for most people in the United States, mowed yards were out of reach until around the middle of the 20th century, when they became the domain of a booming middle class. Returning veterans of World War II bought affordable homes with spacious yards, gas-powered lawn mowers became household staples, and synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation systems made lawn care easier. Unlike the walled, ornamental lawns of aristocratic Britain, the American lawn was open, borderless and highly visible — what the author Paul Robbins, in his 2007 book “Lawn People,” called “contiguous, and tied to home life.” It came to represent not just individual status but shared community values.

Today grass covers, according to one estimate, about 2 percent of the contiguous 48 states, or roughly 40 million acres — an area about the size of Wisconsin. And rare is the American who wanders his lawn in search of enchantment, like Ms. Covington. He’s more likely to march, armed with pesticides.

Hours and hours are devoted to the lawn’s maintenance. You’d think all that care was a labor of love. But in surveys Mr. Robbins conducted for his book, he found a widespread sense of obligation, not affection. Many Americans, he has said, would “prefer not to have them, but they feel that they need to have them.” And according to a 2025 survey by Tractor Supply, 45 percent of Americans said they felt happy or motivated about lawn care, while 15 percent felt “exhausted,” 14 percent “frustrated” and 11 percent “drained.”

And yet most of us uphold the ritual. Add it to the ever-growing list of things we're busy doing in the name of productivity without really understanding why. What are we so afraid of, a dandelion?



Harry Griffin

A few American organizations are encouraging us to rethink whom our lawns should really serve. Wild Ones, a nonprofit based in Wisconsin, has some 100 chapters across the country. The group promotes natural lawn alternatives that support native plants. Another nonprofit, Homegrown National Park, co-founded by the ecologist Douglas Tallamy, imagines an America where many of our lawns

give way to native trees, wildflower meadows and patches of grass. Rather than green deserts, we could create a national park by stitching together one front yard at a time.

I love this vision. How many trillions of gallons of water might we save? How many apples and heads of lettuce could we grow? How many billions of birds and bugs might return to our neighborhoods? And how many of us might rediscover the quiet, daily enchantment of finding something unexpected just outside the front door?

Sadly, many Americans can't contemplate such an alteration. In 2024, 81 percent of newly built single-family homes were sold in communities governed by homeowners' associations, which can fine and issue violation notices to residents who dare to defy the neighborhood's aesthetic expectations, which can include standards on lawn height, grass types and maintenance. In extreme cases, some Americans have even faced arrest after prolonged disputes over mowing.

How did we create a system in which it's necessary to draw from a deep well of courage to let the grass grow past your ankles, let alone your knees? In which you might have to face the wrath of neighbors who view a wild garden not as a sanctuary but as a sign of sloth? Britons, meanwhile, barring planting harmful species like giant hogweed, can do just about anything they like. "An Englishman's lawn is his own business," as Rob, an English friend of mine, once said to me.



Richard and Sally Worby, residents of Drayton. Jack Kenyon for The New York Times



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Jack Kenyon for The New York Times

I don't want to create the false impression of a rewilded Britain, carpeted in daisies and foxgloves. The meticulously shorn lawn remains popular, as are decorative pebbles and artificial turf. Some gardens are neglected wildernesses; others, prim and tidy.

My neighbors Barry and Margaret, both in their 80s, prefer the tidy sort. For years, I wanted to let my front lawn grow wild. But Barry, unaware, would mow it out of neighborly generosity. It wasn't until my fourth year in the neighborhood — when I felt less like a newcomer — that I worked up the courage to ask him not to, explaining that I wanted my lawn to be more “bird and bug friendly.” An explanation that he accepted as good enough.

This summer I've spent less than 10 minutes working on my front garden. Instead, I've watched apple trees bloom, holly grow as high as my kitchen window and robin fledglings hop through the tall grass. I have enjoyed it more than I've worked

on it. Barry even delayed mowing his bund — a small hill behind his property — in solidarity, and for a couple of months (before his weed-whacking in July) it was full of flowering weeds, a prowling fox and wild strawberries.

If there is any call to action in this, it is to get involved with an organization like Wild Ones — to join a local chapter and campaign for state laws that would force H.O.A.s to give residents the right to grow gardens in their own wildlife-friendly ways.

But mostly, this is a call to inaction. For a country obsessed with productivity and perfection, it's a radical act to just sit and watch things grow.

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