

*Water at Risk Series: The history — and mystery — of lawns*  
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*Caption: This local homeowner went a “little wild” — by letting the borders fill in with hay-scented fern, native shrubs, and some flowers. Instead of tending an acre of grass, lawn is used for pathways.*

There is hardly a zip code in America where grass lawns are not everywhere — even, until recently, in dry desert cities.

Lawns are so common that it’s hard to believe that they were slow to take root in America.

Close-cropped grassland started in medieval Europe as a state-of-the-art defense — giving castle defenders a clear shot at attacking hordes. Later, “the green” was land held in common where the people of a village could graze sheep.

By the 1600s, acres of grass around a stately home were a status symbol, showing off how much money you could afford to fritter away on unproductive land. Then came lawn bowling and golf, more labor-intensive status symbols that were brought by old world immigrants to the wild, new world.

But even in the late 1800s, personal lawns were still possible here only for the very rich.

Until lawnmowers. Manufacturers like Stroudsburg's Worthington Mower Company developed lawnmowers that made tending golf courses more efficient — and cheap. By the 1950s, lawns were everywhere.

When you add up how much they cost, and how little value they provide, the mystery is *why*? Local school districts, municipalities, business parks, and individuals spend millions of dollars — and millions of gallons of water — every year on pointless lawns.

At about six inches, even the deepest-rooted turf grass doesn't come close to the benefits of native plants and shrubs. The root systems of native plants run much, much deeper, holding soil in place during deluges, mitigating flooding, preventing erosion, and surviving droughts without watering.

It doesn't take much for a township or school maintenance crew — or you, for that matter — to get started. Just quit mowing a little short of your usual boundary, say a ten- or 15-foot deep stretch along a line of woods or fence. When left to its own devices, that former stretch of lawn will soon sprout a few wildflowers, perhaps some ferns or seedling trees. Plant a redbud, dogwood, or spicebush and a few clumps of native switchgrass or bluestem — and before you know it, a vibrant, low-maintenance, natural landscape is your reward.

Why not try it yourself this spring? Better still, why not suggest to your municipality that the road crew give it a try. Or ask a school board member to question why they're paying to have (expensive) lawns all the way to the edge of the property. Saving even a few percent on labor, fuel, materials, and equipment can save thousands of tax-payer dollars every year — while adding to your community's natural beauty.

*Did you know?*

Grass provides food and cover for just about no birds or other critters. (Other than voles, moles, ticks, ants, and fleas, that is.) In contrast, native grasses, wildflowers, and shrubs provide nesting, cover, and food sources for small mammals, local birds, butterflies, and the millions of migratory birds that pass through the Brodhead Watershed on their epic journeys every year.

***Brodhead Watershed Association protects water quality and quantity throughout our area. BWA's spring native plant sale offers locally grown native trees, shrubs, flowers, and grasses. Get involved! Become a member!***  
**[www.brodheadwatershed.org](http://www.brodheadwatershed.org)**