

AN ESSAY

Leave It a Little Longer

*On fescue, two white dogs, and the
art nobody is allowed to call art.*

BY CHRIS WYATT · A TEN-MINUTE READ

LET ME START WITH A QUESTION THAT SOUNDS STUPID.
What color is your lawn?

Green, obviously. Except green is the one color your lawn refuses. Chlorophyll drinks red light and blue light and runs the whole enterprise of photosynthesis on them. Green is the part it has the least use for, so it throws it back at you. Every lawn in America is a quarter acre of polite rejection, and it is gorgeous.

Mine, in the last week of September, is rejecting green magnificently. The tall fescue is thick and deep, the kind of green that goes almost blue at seven in the evening. I should mow it this weekend. I will leave it a little longer. By the end of this essay I hope to convince you that this is not laziness. It is the most sophisticated sentence in lawn care.

+ + +

First, a confession about a man you already know. He owns a soil thermometer and uses it. He has feelings about reel mowers. He has, at some point, said the word *thatch* at a dinner party and meant it. He is the punch line of a thousand jokes about suburban men and their compulsions.

I am not him. I just want a nice lawn. (Every man who is him says exactly this.)

But here is my contrarian claim, and I intend to defend it with actual science: the lawn guy is not the least natural man on the block. He is the most natural. He is doing the job of a herd of sheep, and the grass has been waiting for him for a very long time.

+ + +

Quick: where does a blade of grass grow from?

The tip, you would guess, like a tree or a tomato. Wrong. Grass grows from the bottom, from a band of dividing cells tucked down near the crown, right at the soil line. It worked this out over millions of years for a simple reason: something was always eating the top. Bison, antelope, sheep. A tree that loses its top half is firewood. Grass files it under Tuesday.

And here is the part the anti-lawn crowd rarely mentions. Grass does not merely survive being cut. In much of the country, it needs it. Leave a Michigan yard completely alone and you will not get a meadow forever. You will get goldenrod, then sumac and brambles, then maple saplings, and in a generation or two, a young forest. Open grassland has always been kept open by something: fire, grazers, teeth. The mower is just the latest set of teeth. You could almost say grass invented the lawnmower and then waited around for us to build one.

Which brings me back to that sophisticated sentence. The first rule every turf scientist teaches is this: never take more than a third of the blade at once. The leaf is the solar panel. The roots are the savings account, and they are paid entirely out of what the panel earns. Scalp a lawn down to an inch and you have cut the paycheck, so the grass stops funding its roots, which is how you get a yard that looks crisp in May and dead in August. Tall fescue is happiest at around three and a half inches, and when it is, its roots can reach two or three feet down. What you mow

is the tip of the iceberg, in nearly an iceberg's proportions: about a tenth above the surface, the rest below. The difference between a good lawn and a sad one is about an inch and a half, the way the difference between a perfect steak and a gray one is a few degrees. Precision is where pleasure lives.

Even the smell is doing something. That scent of fresh-cut grass, the one that stands in for summer in nearly every memory you own, comes from compounds chemists call green leaf volatiles. The plant releases them the instant its tissue tears. Biologists believe part of their job is alarm: a chemical flare that can warn neighboring plants and, in some species, summon the predators of whatever is doing the chewing. So the smell of summer is, in the plant's own language, a scream. We have simply learned to find it relaxing. I choose not to examine what that says about us.

+ + +

Now the history, which is less innocent. The lawn began as a brag. In eighteenth-century England, a great sweep of short grass outside a country house announced that its owner had so much land he could afford to grow nothing on some of it, and so much labor that men with scythes, or flocks of sheep, could keep it trimmed. Thorstein Veblen, in 1899, filed the lawn under conspicuous consumption. He had a gentler explanation too, wrapped in a theory of race that nobody holds now: a close-cropped lawn pleases the eye because it looks like a well-kept pasture. Take away the wrapping and I like that one better. For people descended from herders, a lawn looks like home.

Then came the machine. In 1830, the story goes, a Gloucestershire engineer named Edwin Budding studied a mill device that trimmed the nap off woolen cloth with a spinning blade, and wondered what it would do to grass. So the lawnmower was born from a machine that sheared

cloth, which was made of wool, which came off the sheep that used to do the mowing. The history of the lawn is sheep, all the way down.

My favorite detail is Budding's sales pitch. He suggested that country gentlemen might find running the machine themselves "an amusing, useful, and healthy exercise." Read that again. The very first lawnmower was marketed directly to the man we now make fun of. The lawn guy is not a mutation of the species. He was the target market.

In America, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux planned Riverside, Illinois, in 1868 and 1869. Every house had to sit at least thirty feet back from the road, and Olmsted wanted no high walls along it. The front yards were meant to run together into something like one continuous park. That is still the best argument for a front lawn I know. It is the only piece of property you own mostly for other people to look at.

+ + +

Another question. When you see a ballpark striped in light and dark green, what color is the dark grass?

Trick question. It is the same grass. There is no paint and no second variety. The mower's roller simply bends the blades in the direction of travel. Blades leaning away from you catch the sun and bounce it back to your eye, so they look pale. Blades leaning toward you show their shadowed sides, so they look dark. Walk to the other end of the field and the stripes swap. The pattern exists only as a relationship among the grass, the sun, and wherever you happen to be standing. That is not yard work. That is optics. It is closer to a Bridget Riley canvas than to a chore.

In Kyoto, monks rake gravel into parallel lines around stones, and no one calls them obsessive. We call it a garden of contemplation and put it in the guidebooks. A man mowing in straight lines, overlapping each pass by a few inches, turning with care so the edge stays clean, is doing the same thing in a medium that grows back and erases him every week. The

monk's lines last until the rain. The mower's lines last until the grass stands back up, a day or two. If anything, his is the humbler art.

+ + +

So why do we laugh at him? I think I know, and it is a little tender.

Plenty of men do not have many approved outlets for gentleness. We are rarely invited to say out loud that we want to nurture something, watch it closely, notice when it is struggling, and help. But a man can spend an hour on his knees in the yard, coaxing seed into bare soil, misting it twice a day, checking every morning for the first green thread, and everyone will just say he is fussy about the lawn.

He is not fussy. He is caring for a living thing in public without having to name it. The lawn is his permission slip. The jokes about him are how the rest of us avoid noticing how gentle he is being.

+ + +

I have two assistants in this work, and they are actively sabotaging it. Coco Bear and Tallulah are Great Pyrenees: roughly two hundred pounds of white fur between them, livestock guardians bred in the mountains between France and Spain to protect sheep on open pasture. So I have brought home two animals whose entire ancestry is guarding grass that sheep have grazed, and turned them loose on grass that a machine has grazed in imitation of sheep. They understand the assignment perfectly. They lie in the middle of it like snowdrifts and survey the street.

They also burn it. Here is the surprise: those brown spots are, chemically, fertilizer burn. Dog urine is loaded with nitrogen, precisely what the lawn wants, plus salts it does not, all delivered in one spot at a strength no grass can take. The proof is at the edge of every spot, a ring greener and lusher than anything around it, where the dose was diluted just enough. The line between too much love and just enough is visible, and it is about two inches wide. So I rake out the dead patches, loosen the soil, and

reseed, while Coco Bear and Tallulah (also known as Toodles, also known as Toots) supervise with enormous dignity. There are worse ways to spend a Saturday than fixing what the ones you love have broken simply by being themselves.

+ + +

Fairness demands that I let the prosecution speak. American lawns cover something like forty million acres, a little more than the whole state of Georgia. By one NASA-funded estimate, that makes turf the largest irrigated crop in the country, at least three times the acreage of irrigated corn, and it feeds exactly no one. It is a monoculture. It drinks water in dry places and chemicals nearly everywhere. The people urging us toward clover and meadow are not wrong about any of that.

But notice something odd. The practices behind a healthy lawn and a greener planet keep turning out to be the same practices. Mow high, because long fescue roots deep, shades out weeds, and needs less water. Seed in fall, when nature would. Water less often and more deeply. Leave the clippings where they fall. They are free fertilizer. Nearly everything that makes a lawn bad for the world is haste and chemistry. Nearly everything that makes it beautiful is attention and patience. The enemy was never the grass. It was the hurry.

And since I believe in grounding, a word on that. Some people make big claims about the electrical benefits of bare feet on bare earth, and the evidence for those claims is thin. The other kind of grounding is not thin at all. Take off your shoes on a cool evening and stand on grass you have cared for, and you will know exactly where you are. That is not a theory. That is an address.

+ + +

There are chairs out on the front lawn. In the evening we sit there, my wife and I, dogs sprawled beside us, and we wave to whoever walks by.

Young parents with a stroller. A man with a leash in each hand. Kids on bikes going too fast. Some stop and talk. Olmsted's idea, a century and a half late, lands right here: a private yard doing public work, a long green handshake between a home and a street.

Late September is the fescue's finest hour. The soil still holds August's warmth, the air has gone cool, and a cool-season grass is never happier. The seed I put down will sprout in a couple of weeks, spend the winter quietly building roots, and earn its keep in April. Which means I planted it on faith, for a version of this yard that does not exist yet. Every gardener is making promises to the future. The lawn guy just makes his in the most ordinary place there is.

So here, as promised, is why that sentence is the smartest one in lawn care. *Leave it a little longer* is the one-third rule. It is the root account, paid in full. It is faith in April. It is one more evening in the chairs before the first frost. Five words, and every one of them is doing agronomy.

The lawn is perfect right now. I could cut it this weekend. I will leave it a little longer. The dogs are out there, the light is going gold, and I would like to sit a while. ♦

SOURCES. Mowing height and the one-third rule follow NC State Extension's tall fescue maintenance calendar. On root depth, Lin Wu, "Matching Irrigation to Turfgrass Root Depth," *California Turfgrass Culture* (1985). On the smell of cut grass, Scala and colleagues, "Green Leaf Volatiles," *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* (2013). Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), chapter 6. Budding's specification is quoted as printed in Loudon's *Gardener's Magazine* (1832). Olmsted, Vaux and Co., *Preliminary Report upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside* (1868). The turf acreage is the central estimate of Milesi and colleagues, "Mapping and Modeling the Biogeochemical Cycling of Turf Grasses in the United States," *Environmental Management* (2005), a study supported by NASA. On mowing stripes and urine spots, the turfgrass programs at the University of Minnesota and Kansas State University.