



BY LISA SRISURO

Ted Steinberg is a professor of history and law at Case specializing in 19th and 20th century American environmental, legal, and social history. His new book, American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn (2006, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.), was released in March.

► **Case Magazine: How did you become interested in this unusual topic?**

Ted Steinberg: It wasn't until I moved to this area, Shaker Heights, in 1996, that the importance of the lawn in American culture was really driven home for me. I was struck by the incredibly high lawn standards in my neighborhood. I grew up on Long Island, which I had always thought of as the turf grass capital of the world, and I just could not believe some of the lawns my neighbors had. I mean, people planted creeping bent grass in their front yard—the same species of grass that you would see on a putting green. Carve a cup and put a flag in and you could putt right across their front lawns. Seeing these pristine lawns, I got interested in how this quest for perfection came to be.

► **CM: You say that the obsession with the ideal lawn was largely born following the second world war. Why then?**

TS: It was a combination of corporate imperatives and trends in consumer culture. In the post-war years there was an explosion of suburban development due to many factors such as federal policies regarding mortgages and the birth of the interstate highway system. In this climate, you had people in the chemical lawn care business cultivating the

idea of perfect turf. They weren't just selling mundane items like grass seed; they were selling an idea of the lawn as a portal to upward mobility. The suburbs with their methyl green lawns also reflected trends in post-war consumer culture. They were of a piece with yellow slacks and blue Jell-O. Brightly colored products suggested that the consumer was ultra-modern, forward-looking. They were leaving behind the black and white world of urban life and heading out to the suburbs with their multi-colored palettes.

► **CM: You say that the quest for the perfect lawn has become a uniquely American phenomenon.**

TS: Yes. I believe that we're the only nation in the world that celebrates National Lawn Care Month in April. Lawn care in the United States is a \$40 billion a year industry. There are 26 million leaf blowers in the U.S. In that sense, the U.S. really is unique in how far it's gone down the road to perfection. There are 16,000 golf courses in the United States, which is some of the most intensively managed grass in the world.

► **CM: You encountered some unusual homeowners in your research, people you call "turf fundamentalists." Tell us about some of these characters.**

TS: I love the story of the actor Richard Widmark. Back in the 1990s he was living on a 40-acre spread in Connecticut. He actually mowed his lawn and also his neighbors' and, in the course of doing this one day, he had an accident and nearly lost his leg. At the hospital, upon recovery, the question he asked the doctors was not "Will I ever act again?" but "Will I ever mow again?"



With the arrival of spring also comes the onset of the perennial suburban neurosis: a lush green lawn to rival any on the block. Case Professor Ted Steinberg discusses the origins of this preoccupation and shares the research that led to his new book.

You also have the people who do the lawn striping, mowing a pattern into their lawn like you would see on a baseball field. Some chap who, in order to deal with an invasion of army worms, erected this plastic barrier around his property and smeared Vaseline on it so he could save his yard.

► **CM: And to what end? Is the perfect lawn even attainable?**

TS: Unfortunately, no. The perfect lawn is an impossible ideal. Turf grasses—there are about 50 species—aren't native to the U.S. Growing them in most parts of North America is pretty much an uphill ecological battle.

To make things even harder, many of the things people do are actually working against them. People who want green grass in the spring, for example, fertilize too early in the season.

When you do that, you're sacrificing root growth for shoot growth; you get a short-term boost in growth and in color but at the expense of the roots. Later on in the summer when the weather get hotter, the roots are unable to absorb the water. Then you have to go out and water, which, if you do it too much, leeches minerals out of the soil. It's a cycle.

Cutting the grass short—the "crew cut" look—actually traumatizes the grass plant and makes it more susceptible to disease, hence the need for fungicides to control fungal outbreaks. Also, cutting the grass short opens it to crabgrass. Crabgrass needs light to germinate. If you keep your grass a little over three inches, you'd probably eliminate your crabgrass problem.

► **CM: You write in your book about the environmental impact of the perfect lawn. What to you is the most pressing issue?**

TS: Groundwater contamination is definitely an important issue here. Certain herbicides, especially the most popular ones, have a high leaching potential that can be especially problematic in areas with sandy soil.

► **CM: What are some measures that can be taken to solve this problem?**

TS: In most states local governments cannot pass regulations that would prohibit the use of pesticides. That's a problem. When there's evidence of groundwater contamination in an area, I think it appropriate that local government could forbid the use of lawn care chemicals in that area.

Industry could also do a lot to help ameliorate the problem. For example, the whole idea behind the popular product weed 'n feed is problematic. There is simply no good reason to put down weed killer every time you put down fertilizer. We could get rid of weed 'n feed.

► **CM: What does your lawn look like?**

TS: It's definitely not a social statement. I don't irrigate my lawn and when you don't irrigate and you get a very hot summer like we had last summer, that means some of the areas are going to die. We'll have to put grass seed down this year to make it look better. My kids play on the lawn, and that's not a good prescription for perfection. So I'd say all in all it's a pretty mediocre lawn. I'm not going to be winning any awards. ☒

Lisa Srisuro is a Cleveland-area writer.

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