

HOME-GARDEN

Balancing act: The nostalgia of cut grass, the benefits of low-impact lawn maintenance

Mark Richardson Special to the Telegram & Gazette

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I love the smell of freshly cut grass. It instantly conjures memories of childhood summers, staying out playing with my friends in the neighborhood until the streetlights turned on, visiting the ballpark behind my house to buy candy at the snack bar, and hours spent doing absolutely nothing but exploring for salamanders in the woods around my house. It's amazing how our brains are wired to recall specific memories when triggered by familiar smells.

As an ecological horticulturist, one who regularly encourages people to “kill their lawn,” it's hard to reconcile the nostalgia of those early memories against the environmental catastrophe that the modern American lawn represents. From acute toxicity of common lawn pesticides to the carbon impact of lawn maintenance equipment and fertilizer production, there's no doubt that the way we manage our lawns is damaging not only to the environment, but also to human health.

Many of us who work in the landcare industry practice low impact lawn maintenance, including reducing the amount of space dedicated to lawn, reducing or eliminating the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and converting to electric lawn maintenance equipment. A lot of the steps we take in trying to reduce the environmental impact of lawn maintenance results in lawns that are more biologically diverse and home not only to cool-season turfgrasses, but also companion plants like clover, violets, dandelions, creeping Charlie, bluets, and other flowering plants often considered lawn weeds. Tolerating lawn weeds not only reduces the environmental impact of our lawns, but also provides habitat for bees and other pollinators for whom the typical American lawn may as well be a parking lot, providing little to no habitat value. Another very simple strategy homeowners can take to increase the habitat value of their lawns is to reduce their mowing frequency.

In 2013 and 2014, the USDA Forest Service carried out a novel research project. Researchers, led by Susannah Lerman from the Forest Service's Northern Research Station, convinced sixteen homeowners in Springfield, Massachusetts to let them take over their lawn maintenance for the summer. The purpose of the research was to determine the impact of mowing frequency on bee populations. While habitat loss due to development and intensive agricultural practices have led to a global decline in insect populations, researchers suspected that even heavily developed urban and suburban areas could provide insect habitat with small changes in land care practices. The researchers analyzed the impact of three different mowing frequencies: once per week, every other week, and every three weeks. They studied the resulting impact on "floral resource abundance" and bee populations, comparing the results against mowing frequency and found that mowing a lawn less often provided more habitat and an overall increase in bee populations.

The full story of the research project is the recommendation to adopt what the research team termed a "lazy lawnmower" approach to lawn maintenance. They suggest adopting an every other week approach to lawn mowing as a great way to support bees and other pollinators, while still maintaining an aesthetic that is relatively close to the traditional American lawn. In fact, the results of the research indicated that mowing every other week was preferable even to mowing less frequently.

This summer, avoid those approaches to lawn maintenance that promise a turfgrass monoculture. Don't reach for a bag of weed and feed. Turn off the irrigation, and instead, try the "lazy lawnmower" or "slow-mow summer" approach to lawn maintenance. Resist the urge to keep that perfectly manicured monoculture of turfgrass species and provide a little slice of habitat for bees and other important pollinators. Not only will you be able to reclaim the part of your weekend that you dedicate every week to lawn care, you'll also be able to say you're doing your part to reduce your overall environmental impact. Photo caption: New England Botanic Garden's director of horticulture suggests a relaxed approach to mowing this summer to reduce the environmental impact of lawn maintenance.

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Mark Richardson. Located on 171 acres in Boylston. New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

