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Lawns are a Soul-Crushing Timesuck and Most of Us Would Be Better Off without Them

By Christopher Ingraham

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A recent essay by an Ohio woman who refuses to mow her lawn has struck a nerve. Thirteen hundred people have weighed in with a comment on Sarah Baker's tale of flouting a neighborhood mowing ordinance in the face of a \$1,000 fine.

As Baker notes in her essay, lawns are a big part of contemporary American life. There are somewhere around 40 million acres of lawn in the lower 48, according to a 2005 NASA estimate derived from satellite imaging. "Turf grasses, occupying 1.9% of the surface of the continental United States, would be the single largest irrigated crop in the country," that study concludes. Conservatively, American lawns take up three times as much space as irrigated corn. The authors mapped the entirety of the nation's turf grass, below. You'll notice that it's basically a population density map of the U.S. — where there are people, there are lawns.

In some states, a significant chunk of the landscape is covered in turf grass — meaning residential lawns, commercial lawns, golf courses, and the like. Delaware is 10 percent lawn. Connecticut and Rhode Island are 20 percent. And over 20 percent of the total land area of Massachusetts and New Jersey is covered in grass, according to that 2005 NASA study.

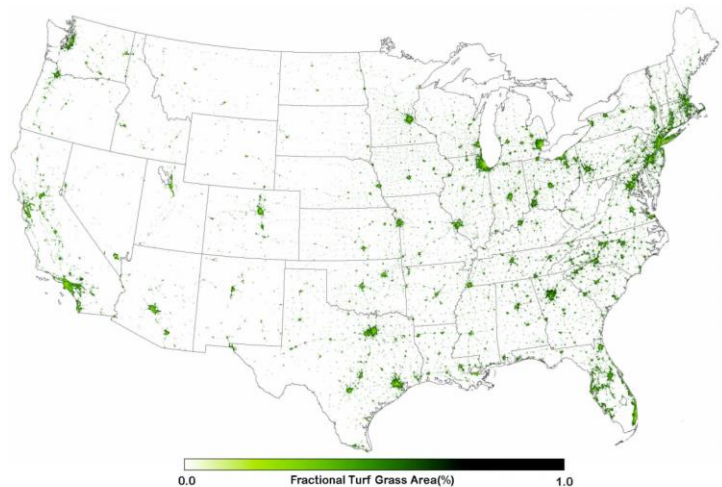


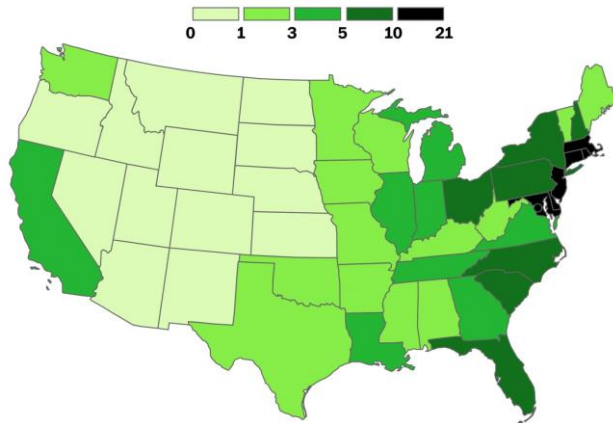
Figure 1. Distribution of the fractional turf grass area (%) in the conterminous U.S.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the traditional American lawn has come in for some scrutiny in recent years. Some, like Baker, are abandoning regular lawn maintenance out of environmental concerns — lawns require fertilizer to grow and gas to mow, and they take up space that could otherwise be used for animal habitat.

Other folks are ditching their lawns because of the amount of water they soak up — 9 billion gallons of it per day, according to the EPA. Think of the miracle that is the modern water supply — pristine water pumped hundreds of miles, passed through shiny state-of-the-art filtration systems, treated with miracle chemicals that keep our teeth from falling out of our heads, and available on-demand at the twist of a knob.

Turf nation.

Percent of total land area covered by turf grass (lawns, golf courses, etc.)



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Source: "Mapping and Modeling the Biogeochemical Cycling of Turf Grasses in the United States"

And then consider that we intentionally dump billions of gallons of that water out on the ground!

These reasons are all well and good enough. But if you're an average lazy American like me, with kids and a dog and maybe a mortgage and probably a job too, these may seem like valid concerns but they're probably not worth changing your behavior over. So consider the most compelling reason to ditch your lawn, or to at least scale it back: time.

The average American spends about 70 hours a year on lawn and garden care, according to the American Time Use Survey. Considering that this is an average figure that also includes people who don't spend *any* time mowing, the number for people who actually have a lawn, and actually mow it, is going to be considerably higher than that.

Some people take pride in their lawns, and get a lot of fulfillment by keeping them immaculately-manicured. So for these folks, this is time well-spent. But for many of the rest of us, mowing a lawn is nothing more than a chore, and a despised one at that. A November 2011 CBS news poll found that for 1 in 5 Americans, mowing the lawn was their least-liked chore — ranked lower than raking leaves and shoveling snow. Interesting aside: Democrats (25 percent) were considerably more likely than Republicans (16 percent) to say mowing the lawn was their least-favorite chore.

Again, in some cases the time investment may be worthwhile — some families use their lawns all the time. But think of your own neighborhood, and of the number of houses where the only time you see somebody out on the lawn is when it's getting mowed.

It doesn't need to be this way — there are plenty of low-maintenance alternatives to turf grass out there. But some homeowners associations require residents to keep a lawn. And plenty of municipalities, like Sarah Baker's, have strict guidelines on how a lawn should be maintained.

But in the end, much of the pressure to keep and maintain a lawn is self-imposed. Freeing yourself from all those hours on the lawnmower might simply be a matter of realizing that there are alternatives.