Camden Green

When R.B. and Jenny Fitch set out to develop an English-style small Southern village, their vision was of a walkable, esthetically beautiful, and neighborly community. Green lawns are an important aspect of that aesthetic. English landscapes have tremendous diversity, from intimate cottage gardens to expansive, landscaped estate parks. A common trait is a well-manicured, lush lawn. For landscapes with a series of bountiful, blooming gardens, what is known as the English Great Lawn serves as the "lungs of the garden." In smaller gardens a lush strip of lawn helps define and frame the planted landscape.

So, how are we in the Camden Park service group doing to fulfill that vision and borrow from the British when it comes to our common area lawns? How especially are we navigating an expanding ethos of sustainability with the urge to have a lush lawn? How do we grow grass under the shade of beautiful street trees? How do we keep a cool-season grass like our turf-type tall fescue green while other nearby communities (Briar Chapel and Chatham Park) are meeting the challenges of a warming climate with warm-season lawns. If the unseen world of soil life helps determine the health of our grass and plants, how do we compensate for the challenging soil of the Camden Park neighborhood?

Neither the Camden Park Landscape Committee nor our principal landscape management contractor, Bland Landscaping, have all the answers, but I highlight below some of the progress we are making. Note that our common areas do not include Camden Park—affectionately known as "Jenny's Park"—in the center of our neighborhood, which is not owned by our service group.

Mowing/Edging

Mowing for Bland Landscaping came early this year. Generally, a three- to four-person crew mows four days of the week with cooperating weather. They focus on activities like picking up limbs and weed control on the fifth day.

Bland mows at a 3.5"–4" height as recommended by the Cooperative Extension Service for maximum turf health. At our urging, Bland focuses on mowing areas with the greatest growth during hot, dry spells. Some areas will not be mown weekly at those times to reduce dust, prevent compaction of turf and soil, and reduce carbon footprint and noise as well as the crews' exposure to high heat and ozone levels.

You may be pleased to know that Bland plans to convert to electric equipment (blowers and trimmers first) in the coming years as battery life increases and costs come down.

Bland aims to edge every other week.

Nuisance Control

The second application of crabgrass preventer will be applied in the coming weeks (two applications timed correctly provide about 90% control).

There has been some spot control of cool season weeds, which will decline on their own with hot weather, and summer weed control will occur as needed. Interestingly, Penn State agronomists told a conference of Carolina sustainable farmers that the Carolinas have 70% more weed species than Pennsylvania.

Cool season wild bluegrass/*Poa annua* can be controlled if pre-emergent is applied in the fall. That application is not done since it would also negate our lawn renovation/fescue-overseeding efforts. Fortunately, wild bluegrass goes away with warmer weather.

Control of nutsedge takes two applications, and we've asked Bland to begin control as seedlings emerge. Nutsedge is a rapid spreader and is tough to kill if it goes to seed.

Fertilization

Lawns are fertilized three times a year with an environmentally safe, slow-release nitrogen product.

Shade Conditions

Growing grass under deep shade with exposed tree roots is highly problematic. Moss or mulch is preferable. Although lime deters but does not kill moss, random soil tests have shown that our soils have a high pH (of about 7.0). We have opted not to apply lime, as it increases pH. Piedmont soils are generally acidic, which is best for growing most plants and grass. Fertilizer applications have trace elements, such as sulfur and iron, which help acidify.

Best Practices for Lawns and Soil

Lawn Reduction. A prior Landscape Committee met with our Cooperative Extension agent to discuss ways we can adhere to sustainable landscaping best practices. One of the agent's recommendations was to reduce lawn in common areas to conserve water and to reduce the potential for runoff. That committee and your current committee have followed that advice by creating a mulch strip along East Camden (the road), expanding the tree rings in most areas of McDowell, and reducing a portion of the sloped lawn at Caswell Square.

Soil Conditions. Chatham County's environmental specialist, Susannah Goldston, observes that Camden's soil has a thin layer of topsoil and a very compacted subsoil of metamorphic rock. I've observed that growing lush turf is difficult in some areas, such as near our squares, and I suspect the soil structure is the culprit, with few options to resolve the issue.

Bermuda Grass. As Bermuda grass encroaches with increasingly warmer weather, we may have tough decisions ahead of us. Without applying a nonselective herbicide that kills it early in the season, Bermuda grass is apt to win in those areas over time. You probably know that glyphosate/Roundup, a nonselective herbicide, is not used on a commercial basis in Camden Park due to health and environmental concerns. We may prefer our fescue lawns that are green 12 months of the year, but we could end up with stretches of Bermuda grass in coming years.

Lawn Disease. Lawn disease has been a problem in the past, and the Landscape Committee and our landscape contractor at that time concluded that fungicide applications were ineffective. Some fungicides are suspected of being carcinogenic, and some have been removed from commercial sales altogether. Fortunately, the blend of three fescues that Bland overseeds in the fall is both disease resistant and drought resistant.

The "No Lawn" Debate

There are "no lawn" advocates, but I subscribe to our Cooperative Extension Service's perspective:

> Lawns are smooth, living carpets that add beauty and recreational space to your home. The benefits of a healthy lawn go beyond the obvious. As your grass grows, it helps the environment by stabilizing soil and reducing air pollution, noise, heat, dust, and glare. Surveys show that an attractive, well-landscaped lawn can even add to the value of your home.

I hope you agree that R.B. and Jenny Fitch's vision of a walkable, esthetically beautiful, and neighborly village is still worth pursuing.

Larry Newlin
Landscaping