

An Appeal from an Imperfect Lawn

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Azure Bluets (*Houstonia caerulea*)

What exactly is the “perfect” lawn? The classic picture, familiar to us all from John Deere commercials and suburban coming-of-age movies, has become a comfortable norm: perfect squares of emerald green grass, each blade cut to exactly 2.5 inches tall in identical, uninterrupted stripes.

These lawns bother me. They stick out like a sore thumb on dense streets, where their sharp green borders (trimmed within an inch of their life to match the contours of the curb) clash jarringly with uneven growth next door. Hiking to summits around town provides clear views of where manicured private land interrupts otherwise wild ridges, where golf courses sprawl between the cooler greens and browns of the forest.

It's not so much the appearance that gets to me; I can understand the pristine appeal. But I know what I'll find if I crouch in those lawns to peer through the grass blades, if I poke under leaves or listen for birdcalls – and it is a whole lot of nothing.

The “perfect” lawn means different things to different people, and this is exactly why. The perfect lawn has, to many, become synonymous with flat, unremarkable stretches of nothing but grass: one type of grass, one color of grass, one height of grass. No moss. No clovers. No glimmer of small flowers to break up the green. No beetles wandering or caterpillars crawling or moths fluttering. Just grass.

This is not my perfect lawn.

I have always had a knack for finding four-leaved clovers. I love wandering through grassy stretches looking for them, and finding on my way an array of miniature wonders: the soft purple petals and heart-shaped leaves of Common Blue Violets, the stout stalks and four-petaled flowers of Azure Bluets, the spiky white caps marking clusters of round Puffball mushrooms. Among them, bumblebees trundle to-and-fro, bundles of golden pollen stored on their hind legs. Ants march along with purpose, building an empire of mountains and tunnels with an industriousness I have yet to master. A thick green caterpillar masquerades expertly as a blade of grass, only to be disturbed when a bluebird dives down from the hickory branches above to carry it back to a birdhouse of shrieking chicks.

This is when I love a lawn: when it becomes not a stretch of boring grass maintained simply for aesthetics, but an ecosystem in its own right, bursting with blooms and bugs and life. It's this sort of lawn that makes us good neighbors to the natural spaces we reside in, sharing our yards as habitat for meadow-loving songbirds or our garden flowers as food for pollinating insects.

While I recognize that flopping down in the grass to poke around for cool beetles or photograph tiny flowers isn't everyone's cup of tea, I do think we can all stand to spend a bit more time considering how our own yards are participating in that ecosystem around our homes. While my perfect lawn is one that adds to that ecosystem – by offering pollinator friendly native plants, the sheltering habitat of a broad oak's branches, the cool water of a birdbath – I hope that yours is, at least, one that does not actively detract from it.



A fledgling Great Horned Owl
(*Bubo virginianus*)

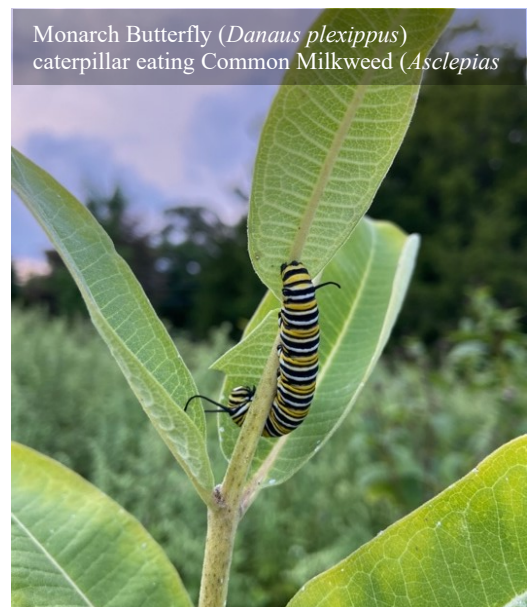
This is the real difficulty with the classic “perfect” lawn. The cost of maintaining an uninterrupted monoculture of undisturbed grass often comes from the tools required to cultivate it as such: pesticides. And that cost, unfortunately, cannot be contained within the neatly defined boundaries of our yards.

Pesticide is a broad term describing any substance used to repel or kill undesired organisms. They’re subcategorized by target: herbicides kill weeds, insecticides kill bugs, rodenticides kill rodents, and so on. While the ideal pesticide kills only its specific, intended target, such precision is often quite difficult to achieve – particularly in a cost-effective manner. Often, pesticides are applied with a more blanket approach. You want a lawn free of mosquitos and ticks? Spray an insecticide that kills every invertebrate, from the pesky mosquitos to the endangered Monarch Butterflies.

This heavy-handedness is problematic precisely because many pesticides are applied so broadly that very little actually hits the intended targets. Rodenticides, for example, are often used to target very specific pest problems with mice or rats, but end up in the bellies of the hawks and owls that feed those poisoned rodents to their unfortunate chicks. Herbicides sprayed or dusted across lawns often leach into the surrounding water and nearby greenspaces, while those applied in pellet form are often mistaken as grubs and eaten by songbirds.

Such problems are pervasive in lawn care. [Over three quarters of U.S. homes apply pesticides annually](#), and the EPA’s most recent estimates found that the yearly country-wide usage exceeded [1.1 billion pounds](#). Consequences include [7 million annual bird deaths](#) – attributed specifically to pesticides used just for cosmetics, or making lawns look how we like them – and [recent federal surveys](#) found pesticides in 90% of small streams tested. They’re [not exactly healthy for people](#), either; many pesticides remain poorly regulated despite being known carcinogens or neurotoxins.

The problem stretches far beyond the boundaries of our yards. While lawns are among the most intensively chemically treated spaces in the world, [90% of U.S. pesticide usage focuses on agriculture](#). There are good reasons for this – it is crucially important to be able to grow and protect crops – but pesticides are a solution that has not been well applied. Herbicides and insecticides aimed at eliminating pest species are often just as harmful to the pollinators that are essential for crop growth. The broad application of pesticides allows some target species to become very tolerant of them, thus requiring even more chemicals to effectively control outbreaks. Many of the applied chemicals do not reach their target organisms at all, but instead leach into groundwater and spread into the surrounding environment.



Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*)
caterpillar eating Common Milkweed (*Asclepias*)



This pesticide strategy is akin to finding a spider in your bedroom and lighting your whole house on fire to get rid of it. Sure, you'll kill the spider, but where are you going to live now?

We need to consider the consequences of pesticide usage, both on the land we ourselves are responsible for maintaining and more broadly at the legislative level. I do not advocate for blanket-banning every pesticide without consideration; appropriate usage of appropriate pesticides can be critical for effective crop and invasive species management. However, the lack of knowledge or regulation altogether allows for the growing popularity of particularly noxious pesticides like *neonicotinoids*. Known for short as 'neonics,' this type of insecticide is an aggressive neurotoxin which is either sprayed over fields, where it very quickly leaches into any surrounding water, or applied directly to seeds, making entire plants toxic to both pest insects that try to eat them *and* to beneficial insects that try to pollinate them.

Outside of farming, many of the seeds we purchase to plant in our own gardens are treated with neonics without our knowledge – meaning that some well-meaning pollinator gardens and vegetable patches are poisoning bees, moths, and butterflies without us even knowing about it. Such applications have led neonics to become [a leading cause of pollinator decline worldwide](#). They continue to be used indiscriminately, despite most neonics just [leaching into the soil](#), resulting in widespread [insect die offs](#) with [limited economic benefit](#). While these repercussions have gotten neonics banned in the EU and several US states, Connecticut is not yet one of them: [the most recent attempt to ban non-agricultural neonic died in chamber last month](#).

That means more work is needed on our end. As another No Mow May draws to a close, I urge you to add pesticide usage to the list of factors you think carefully about in your own lawns and gardens. While we can be good neighbors to our wild environment by letting our lawns shrink, our grasses grow wilder, and our gardens fill with native flowers, perhaps the most impactful step we can take is ensuring we are not introducing chemicals that will spread far beyond our own yards and persist far longer than we will. Such pervasive pesticide impacts inspired Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, one of the founding works of the environmental movement, over 60 years ago; perhaps it is time to once again take a harder look at what exactly our perfect lawns are costing our natural world. Perhaps a perfectly imperfect one will do instead.

