

Seeing the Lawn Differently

C. Uhl

The American lawn is a wonderful thing--a place for playing or just lazing about; it frames our homes and soothes our spirits. I love the lawn and perhaps because of this couldn't resist picking up a recent book on the subject--Herb Bormann's, Redesigning the American Lawn. Bormann is a retired professor of forestry from Yale University. His book is studded with facts. Reading it, one quickly learns that:

- An area about the size of Pennsylvania (25 million acres) is covered by turf grass in the U.S.

- We add more synthetic fertilizer to our lawns than India uses for all of its crops.

- We use up to ten times more chemical pesticides per acre on our lawns than our farmers use on their fields.

- We spend more per acre, on average, to maintain our lawns than we spend per acre on our crops.

Bormann, of course, has a point: the sum total of the materials, energy and effort that we direct to our lawns is substantial. He proposes an alternative: rather than creating "industrial" lawns--the uniform, green, closely cropped, high energy and high maintenance lawn championed by the lawn care industry--he suggests the low energy, low maintenance "freedom lawn"--a diverse mix of grass and herbaceous species, adapted to place and resistant to stress. He has, in effect, proposed a whole new way of thinking about the American lawn.

Shortly after reading Bormann's book, a friend from Latin America visited our home. Ambling up the walk one fine Spring day, he asked to know the name of the beautiful yellow flower (Dandelion) in bloom in our front yard! Just for fun I decided to see what else was blooming in our lawn. We had Chickweed (a succulent green that can be added to salads) in the shade under the pear tree; a large patch of Veronica and Gill-Over-the-Ground in a slight depression under the clothesline; some Daisy Fleabane and Plantain on the slope going down to the sidewalk; a patch of Amaranthus (Native American food plant with protein-rich seeds) in the back corner by the telephone pole; and a variety of clovers and grasses everywhere else. Yes, we had, it seemed, a kind of freedom lawn!

It took my Latino friend to reawaken me to some of the opportunities for ecological education at our doorstep, especially when we give our yards "the freedom to be." The careful observation of any of our "weeds" reveals a wonderful array of adaptations that help ensure survival in human-dominated environments. Take the Dandelion. After forming a rosette and basal flower bud, it pushes up its flower stalk 6-12 inches and flowers in a matter of just a few days. Then, the flower closes and the stalk bends down, nearly prostrate (out of the way of any whacking mowers!). Once the seeds are mature, the stalk straightens again and the seeds are lifted away by the wind. Observing these things closely changes how we think about our lawns.

When I first decided to cut our lawn with a push mower instead of a power mower, I discovered that I had been missing out on a rich sensual experience. It was mid-July. The push mower whirred softly through the grass. It stopped when I stopped. Neighbors walking by stopped to talk (one even asked if she might borrow the mower!). I actually smelled the mix of crushed clover and grass, seasoned on occasion with mint; I could feel the different textures of the plants I was pushing the blade through--some soft, some fibrous; also apparent were the little ups and downs--the microtopography of our lawn. When I finished mowing, the lawn was not cropped close and uniform; rather it had a sort of roguish aspect.

Does our "freedom lawn" raise a few eyebrows? I don't think so. How much freedom is too much freedom, anyway?

