

THE GREAT AMERICAN TURF WAR

THE DEBATE: The changing environmental landscape puts our lush lawns into question

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Like most men of a certain age, R. Hamilton Wright has a deeply rooted love-hate relationship with lawn.

He would say the hate part goes back more than 40 years, when a restless boy was regularly forced to kill a couple of perfectly good play hours pushing a mower along mindless parallel tracks, stopping after each row to meticulously rake up all the clippings.

"An hour after you mowed it, it started growing again," grumbles the Seattle actor, writer and self-confessed "lawn-mower failure" of what he decided early in life was a fruitless endeavor.

So fascinated was Wright by America's pursuit of the perfectly coiffed lawn that he wrote a darkly comic play, "Greensward," about how a threatened \$8.6 billion lawn-care industry goes berserk when a scientist develops the ultimate suburban fantasy — a strain of turf grass that keeps its perfect crew-cut appearance without water, mowing or fertilizer.

That might, after all, render obsolete all the pricey new lawn care toys, like the \$1,749 LawnBott being promoted this spring that mows and fertilizes your turf while you supervise, beer in hand, from a chaise lounge.

And yet, even Wright admits to being "of two minds" about that cool natural carpet that, when freshly cut, emits an intoxicating aroma infused with sublime images and memories of summer.

With its soft, cool, springy feel on a hot day, lawn remains a tempting and intractably attractive place to laze and play. That remains true even in the eco-savvy North Bay where lawns have been slowly receding, an effect both of bigger houses on smaller lots and a growing consciousness about organic gardening.

Mike Lucas, a landscape architect from Healdsburg, just ripped out his front lawn and replaced it with more interesting plants like Japanese maples, bamboos and grassy sedges.

And yet, with a 2½-year-old, he couldn't bring himself to remove his rectangular rug of grass in back.

"We're able to play on it and throw ball," he said. "I've been paring down and trying to keep the grass as minimal as possible," he says. "But I still think that there's something cleaner looking about the monochromatic nature of a lawn."

Although a lot of homeowners are turning their backs on turf, there is, says Wright, "almost nothing as beautiful as a big stretch of green grass."

"On the one hand we poo-poo having a lawn," he muses, "and then we go to a park and just luxuriate in this long, rolling greensward."

The history

Keeping up our lawns to the exacting suburban standards made possible after Edwin Budding patented the first push lawnmower in 1830 amounts to an "uphill ecological battle" of Sisyphean futility, observes environmental historian Ted Steiner of Ohio's Case Western University.



Photos by MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

Healdsburg's Mike and Jennifer Lucas, with their son, Owen, 2, replaced their front lawn with metal, stone and water-efficient plants.



The Lucas family decided to keep a small patch of grass in the back yard for their son to play on.