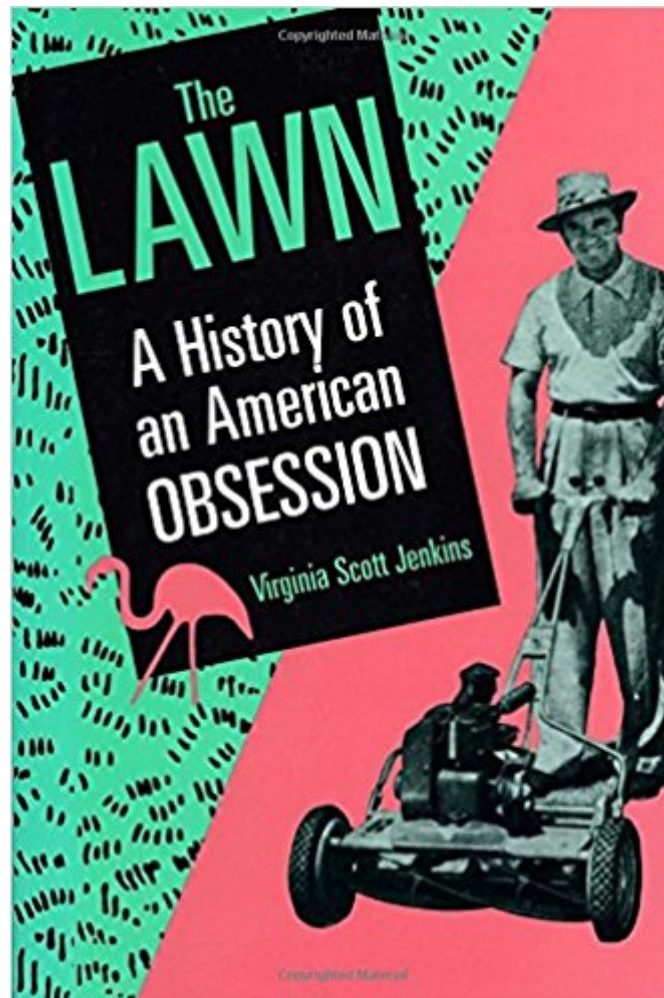




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# The Lawn: A History Of An American Obsession



## Synopsis

Lawns now blanket thirty million acres of the United States, but until the late nineteenth century few Americans had any desire for a front lawn, much less access to seeds for growing one. In her comprehensive history of this uniquely American obsession, Virginia Scott Jenkins traces the origin of the front lawn aesthetic, the development of the lawn-care industry, its environmental impact, and modern as well as historic alternatives to lawn mania.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the 18th-century English landscape, a folly was an extravagant building or ruin. In the 20th-century American landscape, the folly had to be the lawn. Jenkins's account gets off to a slightly slow start as she follows the lawn from its earliest beginnings as a simplified version of English romantic parks in the 19th century to the smooth fairway aesthetic fostered by the U.S. Golf Association (USGA) in the early 20th. But from then on, *The Lawn* is a quirky, thoroughly enjoyable look at man vs. nature, man vs. woman, and man vs. the Joneses. Despite the millions spent by both the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture) and USGA to develop hardy disease- and pest-resistant turf for any climate, it did not obviate the need for tons of toxic herbicides and pesticides, gallons of water (even in the arid Southwest) and, as a 1952 article in *Life* said, the basics--"bamboo rake, grass shears, hand sprayer . . . wave sprinkler, a hoe, wheelbarrow, roller, iron rake, lawn mower and spade, an aerator, a weed knife." It was an arsenal, and Jenkins makes a convincing argument that the military metaphors used by advertisers and lawn-care experts alike

were part of a male viewpoint that saw nature as something to be "controlled and mastered." It wasn't long before that controlled lawn, once a sign of affluence, became the strictly enforced norm of good citizenship and general moral rectitude. This summer could be much more fun if readers ignore their own lawns and stick to Jenkins's. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Virginia Scott Jenkins shows that this uniquely American landscape form is not a native one: indigenous New World grasses were munched into extinction by the colonists' Old World livestock, and the very concept of the lawn was borrowed from the romantic English parks of Capability Brown and from the French tapis vert. But gradual suburbanization and the shaming tactics of appearance-minded neighbors led America to become completely besotted with grass---and lawn care

Reading this history of lawns sent me back to Currier and Ives, where I found that, indeed, there was little grass and lots of chickens around the family homestead. This is a likeable rediscovery of how our need to conform to standardized appearances has shaped our markets and our vision of democracy.

I thought Ms. Jenkins' historical research was thorough enough (Would you expect less from a Smithsonian publication?), but her book reads like (and quite possibly is) a doctoral dissertation. Don't let the pink and green cover with the flamingo fool you. But if you're an American lawn history junkie like me, it's required reading.

Anyone interested in how lawns came to be the "norm" and a standard signifier of upward mobility in America will find this book fascinating. For those who would like to encourage a different urban form (less lawns, houses closer to the street, new urbanism or smart growth) the book offers some hope by its demonstration of how something so "natural" was constructed over the last 80-100 years. The roles of technology, science, and gender politics, as well as class issues and environmental concerns are covered in a way that makes the story more entertaining and underscores the numerous fronts through which the lawn aesthetic was reinforced. I found this to be a great contribution to our understanding of how one element of the bigger picture contributes to larger trends affecting human settlement patterns, the ways we interact with each other and experience community, and even our public health. Now I need to read the history "air conditioning in America" to understand the role of that element....most cultural and social histories certainly cite issues like

lawns and air conditioning as part of the dynamics, but don't have the time or space to examine the issue in depth-- its great that Jenkins does this, even if it was a dissertation (and heck, that's one of the things dissertations are actually useful for...).

This book's title is very appropriate. You will have no questions about how houses all came to be surrounded by lawns after reading this. It explains how agriculture, chemical companies, the garden industry, golfing, housing developments, world wars, etc... and the advent of new inventions have come together to result in an entire lifestyle revolving around 'the lawn.' The writing is smooth and it goes down easy, from cover to cover. Written in language anyone can understand, yet factual enough to hold the interest of those with some existing knowledge. There are about 20 pictures of vintage advertisements for lawn products, which I enjoyed seeing very much. There is also a good bit of detail about what used to grow on the property surrounding most homes before lawns. Please also see, "Redesigning the American Lawn; A search for Environmental Harmony," by F. Herbert Bormann, Diana Balmori, Gordon T. Geballe. This book takes up where we leave off. What is the impact of millions of monoculture lawns on the lifestyles and wallets of those who tend them, and on the environment? How can I change my yard to look better, and spend less time and money tending it (and to have less of a negative impact on the environment.)

This book describes the history of how lawns were first introduced to American, became popular, and then became a necessity. Jenkins traces the early history of lawns as importations of the English country garden concept, as found in Jefferson's gardens in Monticello. She also explains the influences that garden clubs, the golf industry, and the USDA had on the popularization of lawns. The book is not just about lawns, however. It also provides a very interesting analysis of how advertising was used to create demand for completely unnecessary products, and how those products, such as lawn mowers and weed whackers, later came to be thought of as indispensable. This book will be of interest to historians of landscape architecture as well as to researchers of material culture.

Before you go purchase that big bag o' Kentucky Bluegrass seed, read this book. It's a comprehensive history, cultural and ecological critique of something we usually don't think twice about-- the lush, green, overfertilized and ultimately sterile front lawn. Jenkins has a sense of humor about her subject, but doesn't let it mask the very real implications of what happens when all that fertilizer and insecticide almost every suburbanite pours onto their lawns gets into the larger

ecosystem. If you are into American pop culture, environmentalism, class history or even just a good non-fiction read, this book is for you.

a fun insightful look at the western fascination with the lawn

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