

THOUGHTS ABOUT GRASS & WEEDS

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A lawn is nature under totalitarian rule.

Michael Pollan, from Second Nature

To those who read my columns, it may seem odd that I'd devote time to a lawn. In fact, I have been accused, by those who think that

they know me well, of *hating* grass. Not so, although I don't spare my disdain for the so-called “grass” of the modern American lawn.

It is too easy for many ecologically minded people to lump all stretches of open grass together. We imagine the type of lawn Pollan describes, a dreary monoculture of identical blades, ever-thirsty for water, devoid of other life, barren of earthworms killed by the poisons used to make the grass uniform, tended by a paunchy, pasty-fleshed guy in ugly shorts pushing—or better yet, riding—a gleaming machine that belches pollution.

When it comes to grass in its natural form, however, I'm a lover. Lawns can become small seas that lap at the edges of our gardens. Grass can be a place to lie, sleep, play croquet, hold rituals, make love. Given enough land, grass makes a meadow for stargazing, bonfires, pasturage.

Readers might imagine me out pushing an ancient reel-mower, perhaps with a Wiccan pentacle painted on each wheel. I do use a modern version of this device--*sans* sacred symbols or runes--when possible, given the quiet of the machine, the exercise it provides, and the ability to cut grass early on a hot summer's day without waking my neighbors. Despite that, I also have a trusty gasoline mower. It serves double-duty in the fall as a leaf-grinder for making mulch.

Fern and I keep our lawn "natural." We do not use herbicides in space we consider sacred. We also skip grass fertilizers and re-seeding, unless an area has died off completely. Once the local Wire Grass (*Cynodon dactylon*) takes hold, it will not suffer from drought or heat as a sickly tended grass might. We do not cut our grass too short--this can lead to brown spots, thatching, water loss, and other problems. On the other hand, a natural lawn kept at least 2" or 3" tall, with clover and other "weeds" intact, attracts wildlife and insects. Even though we live in the city, we have many rabbits, and they prefer the clover to our lettuce patch nearby.

A natural lawn is not all whimsy and daydreams, however; it can create chores. Wire Grass is legendary for its ability to send out runners with spear-like tips that pierce mulch, newspaper, black plastic, even thick beds of gravel! I have spent years pulling up Wire Grass, and several times I felt my hand twitching in the pesticide aisle at the garden shop. An herbicides was *calling* me. "Burdock," the siren song went, "buy me and I'll solve all your problems. Spray me on heavily, and watch the Wire Grass shrivel as your tomatoes reach for the sun." But then I have actually stayed awake on some late-spring nights, far behind in garden chores, and also heard the Wire Grass taunting me. "Burdock, Burdock, Grass & Weeds, 2

our name is Legion. Inch by inch our army approaches your Basil. We will strangle it and starve you out. In the end, you will rot and we will rule in your place. *This too* is the will of the Goddess.”

Then I wake up. Just remember, when chemicals are needed, choose biodegradable varieties or research home-made remedies; Slug-Bread and Beheaded Thistles is the best work I have found on this topic. Most weeds, even Wire Grass, will succumb to enough layers of old newspaper topped by a thick blanket of more attractive mulch. I have discovered that Wire Grass, lacking deep roots, comes up with a normal four-pronged cultivator as long as the soil is wet. I run a continual Wire-Grass Patrol in Spring, before the soil gets too hard, and then time the weeding a few days after a soaking rain or a thorough watering, the long strands come out of the soil with ease and without pouring chemicals upon sacred space. Yes, it takes time, but time is needed if one is to be a mindful gardener who respects what is sacred in the land. Besides, Wire Grass, in the places where you want it, will ride out a drought and defeat *other* weeds.

Wise practice with something as common as grass helps fulfill our roles as stewards of the land. Here Genesis reveals a forgotten link between earth-based faiths and Judeo-Christian thinking. As theologian Robin Lane Fox makes clear, “dominion over” can be translated as “shepherding of” the earth (177). As stewards, not conquerors, we must acknowledge that we have created environmental disasters. Our stewardship requires that we must correct them.

As you mow the grass or just watch it grow, blessings for the summer and beyond.

Works Cited

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