**Of sheep, scythes, and lawns**

Once upon a time, when dukes and duchesses lounged in the hills of France, they lived in castles surrounded by acres of lawn. At that time, it was important to have an unobstructed view of one’s dominion, because you never knew when a marauding army might come rushing up out of the woods trying to steal your golden goblets. Back then, a lawn was more likely to be made of chamomile or thyme than grass, so it could also be plucked to make tea at bedtime or season a peacock for dinner. Grass lawns eventually came into fashion sometime during the 17th century, though only for the most wealthy landowners who could afford to pay a team of men to cut the grass by hand with scythes.

When European immigrants first settled in the United States, most could not afford to waste time or money on lawns, other than at the White House and other prestigious locations. In the beginning, sheep were used to tend the lawns because they were willing to work long hours and didn’t mind not getting paid. According to the White House Historical Organization, “The sight of sheep grazing on the south lawn of the White House may seem unusual, but during World War I [when Woodrow Wilson was president], it was a highly visible symbol of home front support of the troops overseas. The flock, which numbered 48 at its peak, saved manpower by cutting the grass and earned $52,823 for the Red Cross through an auction of their wool.”

Eventually, as suburbs spread across the United States during the post-World War II era, Americans developed new social norms for lawns, which included the notion that lawns should only be comprised of grass and that they should be trim, tidy and green throughout the year. Though power lawn mowers make quicker work than scythes, the fact remains that many of us today have become servants of our own dominions.

These following strategies can help you to reduce your lawn maintenance, while protecting water and wildlife:

First, avoid putting fertilizer down in the spring, as it will only make the grass grow faster and tends to promote blade growth instead of root growth, making the grass less tolerant to drought during the summer. Set your mower blade higher (3-4in. tall) to encourage deeper roots, and mow less frequently or not at all during dry spells in the summer.

Look for low-cost options that will improve the health of your grass without impacting the environment. Get your soil tested before applying fertilizer (<http://soiltest.cfans.umn.edu>), install a rain sensor or soil moisture sensor and program your irrigation system to deliver no more than one inch (1in.) of water per week, and aerate your lawn once per year to break up compacted soil.

If you’re hiring a lawn service, download [What to ask for from your lawn care provider](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5201a163e4b01f15d7f763c6/t/57ac92e246c3c4d37f35eb51/1470927587554/Good%2Bfor%2Byour%2Blawn%2Bgood%2Bfor%2Bour%2Bwater.pdf) as a guide.

Looking for an alternative to a conventional lawn? Head to [www.blue-thumb.org/turfalternatives/](http://www.blue-thumb.org/turfalternatives/) to learn more about bee lawns, low-mow turf, and perennial ground cover.