

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Lawn People. How Grasses, Weeds and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are

BY PAUL ROBBINS

xxi + 186 pp., 22.5 × 15 × 1 cm, ISBN 978 1 59213 579 0, US\$ 23.95, Philadelphia, USA: Temple University Press, 2007

As a habitat, the suburban lawn is often looked at but seldom analysed. Its extent is vast, and growing. Paul Robbins estimates that in the USA, lawn covers an area the size of the state of Iowa, and it grows continuously as suburbs sprawl and housing lots creep over former rural land. *Homo suburbia* strives to create order in its pocket handkerchief of personal space, creating an ecosystem dominated by exotic species and relentlessly managed by both physical and chemical means to lower its biodiversity. The lawn is the most peculiar of nature reserves: a space where complete control of natural processes is sought in pursuit of aesthetic perfect nature.

But why do so many people spend so much money, time and effort controlling, or even less explicitly manicuring and perfecting, their lawn. Is it peer pressure? A Calvinist refusal to believe that pleasure can come without toil? An attempt to rediscover a lost Eden or a genetic predisposition to feel comfortable in savannah environments? Propaganda from the garden retail industry? In this book, Paul Robbins explains the American suburbia's obsession with the perfect lawn. In the process he offers a clever exploration of the political ecology and actor network theory, and a sharp insight into the cynicism of capitalism in the form of the chemical industry. That is a lot for a slim, nicely illustrated and well-written book to achieve, but it does it with style and intelligence.

*Lawn People* contains eight chapters. The first makes the book's central argument that in order to understand the way people manage their lawns we have to understand that individuals, communities, commercial firms and lawns themselves (in their seasonal ecological dynamics) are all political actors, exerting power over each other. Lawn ecology is first and foremost political ecology. Robbins argues that we should see the lawn as a socio-technical system, and the 'lawn manager' as in a sense a subject disciplined by the demands of the turfgrass habitats they acquire, create and maintain. Chapter 2 analyses the history of the American lawn, not an artefact of culture but a means of defining the responsible American citizen, the disciplined cultural 'turfgrass subject'. To examine the American lawn is to understand something of the culture and society within which it is made to flourish.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the ecology of the single-species lawn, the target of continuous physical and chemical management to prevent seasonal change as grass matures, to keep it damp and to prevent waterlogging, and to fight off those organisms that would share its space and sully its perfection. Chapter 4 analyses the history of the chemical arms race between nature and the lawn care industry, the changing toxicity of chemicals and the way regulation has lagged innovation, and the way toxic chemicals enter the home and the wider ecosystem. Chapter 5 then analyses the lawn chemical economy, including the companies that make the chemicals, apply them and sell them to homeowners. The presentation of the 'perfect' lawn in advertising provides a sharp contrast to the previous discussion of chemical toxicity. These chapters are not at all alarmist in the way

they are written, but their analysis is deeply worrying, particularly for anyone with small children.

The book then turns to what lawn people themselves think, drawing on in-depth interviews. Chapter 6 describes their motivations, and their doubts. Lawn chemical users are not unthinking anti-greens, but are mostly well aware of the risks of chemical use and the problems of irrigation demand. Their anxieties about this are balanced by their sense of responsibilities as neighbours, citizens and lawn owners. Is chemical lawn management inevitable? In Chapter 7, Paul Robbins discusses some of the alternatives, describing attempts to ban or control chemical use (for example in Canada), the development of 'dry' gardens in arid areas and the rise of 'organic' lawn management. Such innovations can face steep social and legal opposition: challenging the idea of the perfect lawn is a deeply political act that directly challenges the economic interests of powerful organizations. Chapter 8 summarizes the argument of the book, and considers the challenge of 'unthinking the American lawn' (p. 135). Paul Robbins obviously believes that all is not lost. In anxiety there is space for political action. A short appendix offers some pointers for action, and places to go for further information on alternatives to conventional turfgrass.

*Lawn People* draws on research funded by the US National Science Foundation, and there is enough discussion of political ecology theory, survey methods and data to make this a book useful for students (indeed, the idea for it arose from a student essay). Yet the book is readable and wide-ranging in its arguments. It can be read for its analysis of the cynicism of lawn care corporations and its deconstruction of their advertising, or for the manifold toxic hazards of lawn chemicals on and off site, or for its exploration of the strangely tortuous anxieties of lawn managers, recognizing the toxicity of the products they apply and yet not questioning the accepted norms of lawn perfection (fitting a pet dog with socks because its paws are burned by pesticides rather than letting 'weeds' grow, fearful of the disapproval of neighbours).

*Lawn People* discusses the American lawn, but its analysis is relevant wherever suburban values extend. The suburban lawn provides a perfect context to understand the Promethean arrogance of the twentieth century's attempt to restructure nature. The lawn requires endless inputs of energy, water and chemicals, and this approach to its management is promoted by entrenched corporate interests and entrenched webs of social relations and cultural values. People tend to regard the perfect lawn as perfectly normal. It is in fact a deeply weird ecosystem that says some disturbing things about people. This book should be widely read and discussed.

BILL ADAMS  
Department of Geography  
University of Cambridge  
CB2 3EN, UK  
e-mail: wa12@cam.ac.uk

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### Redesigning Environmental Valuation: Mixing Methods Within Stated Preference Techniques

BY NEIL A. POWE

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The vast majority of literature advancing the use of stated preference techniques for monetizing changes in environmental quality provides