

Laws About Lawns Are Changing— And You Can Help

This garden hosts a great diversity of beneficial pollinators that come to visit the Spotted bee balm (*Monarda punctata*), Blue mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*), Wrinkleleaf goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*), and Blunt mountainmint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*). Photo by Pru Foster

As society is shifting from valuing uniformity to embracing diversity, so too is our approach to lawn care changing. Indeed, the laws about home landscaping in the US can be seen as a case study of changing values and illustrate how our choices impact broader society—human and non-human.

How do these shifts happen? As Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” A small group of neighbors can insist that everyone else in the community fill their yard with a mowed, pesticide-soaked lawn. Or a small group of advocates can empower more people to choose gardening practices that respect the natural world, protect clean water, and provide safe spaces for wildlife. Both kinds of groups have played a role in the evolution of landscaping practices in America. Here, we trace that evolution and show how you can become part of the proverbial small group (really, a growing movement) driving change towards more sustainable suburban ecosystems.

By JANETTE ROSENBAUM

It all started with Home Owners Associations

Following World War II, America’s rising middle class was expanding into the growing suburbs. In the hopes of creating a “harmonious” community, the developers of Levittown, NY, required aspiring homeowners to sign an agreement to mow their lawn at least once a week between April 15 and November 15. Over the next several decades, such agreements became common in neighborhoods all over the country, and Home Owners Associations (HOAs) were created to enforce these community rules. HOAs became so ubiquitous that towns, cities, and eventually states chose to simplify matters by adopting equivalent requirements at the municipal level. By the 1970s, lawn mowing was the law everywhere in the United States.

And then things began to change.

In 1978, the city of Madison, Wisconsin—which had already made history by inventing the field of restoration ecology and establishing what may

have been the world’s first prairie restoration—became the first municipality in the country to legalize alternatives to lawns. The ordinance that enabled lawn alternatives gave property owners the option to replace their lawns with gardens full of native plants, including native grasses growing at their natural heights.

As the ordinance proposal worked its way through the revision process, Madison city leaders added a permit requirement for tall grasses. Lawn dominance in suburban landscapes had reached such a point that people were no longer familiar with native plants, and folks wanted to know that their neighbors’ native plant gardens were being regulated by experts.

Other cities subsequently adopted similar ordinances, surpassing Madison’s pioneering, pro-native stance by abandoning the permitting process, observing that permit applications were never rejected by reviewers or challenged by neighbors. Other cities joined the transition, moving towards greater acceptance of native plants. Madison’s neighboring suburb, Verona, moved to actively reward sustainable landscaping

practices by providing reimbursements for rain gardens. The entire state of California began offering cash rewards to property owners who shrank their lawns, a program so popular that the associated fund ran out of money. Many Maryland counties also developed rain garden rebate schemes.

In recent years, California has gone even further and now mandates reduced lawn area.

At the end of 2015, America's most populous state passed a law prohibiting large lawns on newly developed residential properties: no more than 25% of the property's landscaped area could be turf. And eight years later, the Golden State decided that even that was not enough. Under a law that goes into effect over the next several years, commercial, industrial, and institutional properties, as well as multi-family housing and similar communities, cannot use potable water to irrigate grass that doesn't serve any functional purpose. In a region increasingly plagued by drought, this means that most properties—including HOAs—can no longer have any lawn at all.

Other states are also overruling HOA agreements that require lawns and ban native plants. In the spring of 2021, thanks to the efforts of a determined homeowner, Maryland passed a law stating that HOAs cannot unreasonably bar their residents from gardening with native plants. That came about the same way all such laws do—from the homeowner standing her ground when the HOA challenged her native plant garden. The homeowner's sister documented the battle in a blog: <https://www.humanegardener.com/butterflies-1-hoa-bullies-0/>

Coincidentally, the author of the article on Page 4 of this issue (Mark Southerland) gave testimony when this new law came before the Maryland General Assembly.



A front lawn, as seen from the house, where grass was replaced with the following natives two years ago: Obedient plant (*Physostegia virginiana*), Blunt mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*), Late boneset (*Eupatorium serotinum*), Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), and Silky dogwood (*Cornus amomum*). Photo by Pru Foster.

Illinois passed a similar law in the summer of 2024.

How, exactly, does a single determined homeowner change a state law?

Part of the answer is that you don't actually do it alone. Identify your allies. Think creatively about who else likes native plants—even if they don't like them for the same reasons you do. Below are some suggestions for impacting state laws.

Attend meetings where decisions are being made, make your stance known.

- Bring your allies!
- Have T-shirts, stickers, or signs, so decision-makers know where you stand even when it isn't your turn to speak.
- Always use your opportunity to give public comments. You can submit written comments, call your representatives, or give verbal testimony.
- Tell decision-makers something they don't already know. For example, maybe they don't know what you just learned: other cities and states are banning lawns

and encouraging native plant gardens.

- Decision-makers like to hear about successful examples of the changes they're considering—and they hate to fall behind other jurisdictions.

Public meetings are not your only opportunity to advocate.

- Request private meetings with legislators—especially the ones who represent you and your neighborhood. Invite them to see a native plant garden.
- Try to anticipate questions and be prepared with answers—but you don't need to know everything! Your passion and lived experiences are persuasive as well. So tell your own story.
- It's also helpful to let legislators know how many people share your point of view. All elected officials want to know that their decisions will be popular.
- Finally, don't forget to vote. This is especially important in local elections.

Want to try your advocacy skills right now?

The Montgomery County Council is debating an ordinance that would require new developments to include 50% native plants in the landscaping. The Council is actively deciding which plant species would count as native, how 50% would be measured, and whether the requirement should be even higher than 50%. These are decisions that you can help influence.

The Maryland Native Plant Society will be offering advocacy training and sending email alerts to our membership. See the "Advocacy" note on page 2.

The author wrote their master's thesis on the environmental impacts of lawns, the history of Madison's laws related to native plant gardens, and how people can effectively get involved in such legislative processes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

REFERENCES

National Wildlife Federation, Guide to Passing Wildlife-Friendly Property Maintenance Ordinances www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/Mayors-Monarch-Pledge/NWF-Landscaping-Guide.pdf