

Treading Lightly on a Summer Lawn

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It's late summer. The tomatoes are done, and the kids are finally getting tired of sweet corn. Barefoot strolls around the garden are crunchier now that my lawn has turned brown, the grass wilting under an unrelenting sun.

My lawn isn't the only one suffering heatstroke. Around here, lawns are mostly planted with Kentucky bluegrass, which thrives when it's cool, but languishes when it's hot. A brown front yard is a source of great consternation to some homeowners; where I live, a poorly tended lawn is a sign of weak moral fiber.

Consider these statistics, though. According to the National Wildlife Federation, seventy million tons of fertilizers and pesticides (which include herbicides and insecticides) are used annually in the U.S. to keep residential lawns looking pristine; they also estimate that 30 percent of residential water use on the East Coast and up to 60 percent on the West Coast is used for lawn watering. It's estimated that the average homeowner uses approximately ten times the amount of chemical pesticides per acre as farmers. People and pets track pesticides inside, where they build up in carpets and clothing, putting families at risk for exposure. The U.S. Geological Survey calculated that 96 percent of fish from U.S. streams and rivers contained detectable levels of at least one pesticide. Fertilizer runoff, caused by rain rinsing the material into water drainage systems,

can cause fish-killing algae bloom as far away as the Gulf of Mexico.

Is green grass worth all that?

I'm as fond of pristine lawns as anyone, but in the summer I let my lawn do what it does naturally—go dormant. The grass leaves die back, risking my reputation as a person of good character, but the crown, the growing point of the grass plant, and the roots are still intact. A lawn can survive four to six weeks without water, but if the drought continues, it's wise to begin watering deeply every two weeks (at least an inch). This will not green up the grass, but it will sustain the crown and the roots so that new growth can resume after regular moisture returns. (Check with your local county extension agent for irrigation guidelines in your area.)

Dormancy is not death. Grass goes dormant to conserve water and energy; it's a God-given survival mechanism that many plants undergo when the season calls for it. In my walk with Christ, there are times when I experience spiritual drought. I remind myself then that, like my summer lawn, I may be wilting on the outside, but "inwardly [I am] being renewed day by day," as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:16 (NIV). Grass will die if the drought goes on—likewise, it's hard to sustain my faith without drinking deep from God's Spirit regularly. I may not "green up" right away, but my roots are still sinking deep into him.

One way to avoid a brown lawn is to

plant native plants, especially in areas where the sun's heat is particularly hard on grass. Natives are adapted to local conditions, and they are much more interesting to people and wildlife than a lawn. On the southwest side of my house, I have planted coneflowers, Indian grass, little bluestem grass, sunflowers, joe-pye weed, and bee balm, along with two varieties of milkweed, the favorite food source for monarch butterfly larvae. When I'm hanging out my laundry nearby, I watch hummingbirds, honeybees, dragonflies, and swallowtail butterflies patronizing the flowers. Besides attracting wildlife, my prairie bed, unlike a lawn, requires almost no maintenance at all, although I do add compost once in a while to loosen the soil and add nutrients.

I grow other native plants in my lawn—they're called weeds. This fall I'm trying something new. I'm going to spread corn gluten meal, an organic pre-emergent fertilizer that will kill all (and I mean all) new emerging plants. Corn gluten takes no prisoners—it's best not applied where you want new grass to grow. Used regularly, however, it will control weeds without synthetics that harm the environment.

Everything's dry now, but soon enough late fall rains will produce a brief lawn renaissance before winter begins. And I'll be reminded again that dormancy isn't death, just a pause before new life can sprout again. □

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