

Ripple Effect #80

WHY THE PREOCCUPATION WITH GREEN?

It's almost spring. Ahead of us lie many trips across our lawn with a lawn mower. We also face another year of struggle with the weeds (especially the yellow-flowered ones) that crop up and the patches of broad-leafed grasses that mar the uniformity of our Kentucky Bluegrass yards. It seems that our efforts to achieve the perfect green never end, yet we go on with our fight for another year.

North American' preoccupation with lawns has been documented by historian Ted Steinberg in American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn. Steinberg debunks the idea that our urge for green is somehow "natural." Rather, he traces the appetite for lawns to eighteenth-century England, when economic times allowed the aristocracy to develop and groom lawns (with the work done, of course, by their laborers). Lawns, Steinberg explains, came to mark aristocracy. This connection appears to have taken literal root in the "new world" where we spend more time and money on our lawns than any other country, including England.

Our own history, of course, also plays a part in our preoccupation with green. Steinberg traces the ubiquitous North American lawn to the development of suburban housing tracks in the late 1940s – most had lawns. The rest, as they say, is history.

But our obsession with perfect lawns had other sources than sprawling suburbs. Steinberg points to the perfectionist culture of the 50s, the long Cold War that engendered a desire in people to control at least one small piece of the earth, and the legislation of a 40-hour week that allowed men more time at home and – in the yard. As corporate culture took over, one that placed many males into subordinate status, a man's lawn became his domain. And, with the ease of using the chemicals to fertilize and eliminate weeds that were developed, and the bigger and better lawn mowers that were manufactured every year, it became more and more part of our culture.

So our obsession with lawns – our single-minded notion of how our yards should look – has a history. Problem is, of course, this history has led us to convert more land into water-thirsty lawns than we have water supplies to support. With spring approaching, we have the chance to consider more water-friendly options for landscaping our yards. Resources on Xeriscaping or Plantscaping abound. Why not take a look?

Until the next Ripple Effect,

The Red River Basin Commission (RRBC)

The RRBC is a grassroots organization that is a chartered not-for-profit corporation under the provisions of Manitoba, North Dakota, Minnesota, and South Dakota law.

Our offices in Moorhead, MN and Winnipeg, MB can be reached at 218-291-0422 and 204-982-7254, or you can check out our website at www.redriverbasincommission.org.

