

Lethal lawn care: Poisons in the grass

by [Norman Wirzba](#) in the [May 18, 2004](#) issue

It's springtime and the pressure is on. For several weeks now I've been growing anxious as I watch the brown neighborhood grasses gradually turn to shades of green. Like other homeowners, I am on the lookout for that first dandelion or patch of crabgrass, sure signs that I've been delinquent in the care of my "back 40." I am ready to stomp out each pesky weed that disfigures the hoped-for lush green carpet.

A lawn obsession like mine makes for good business. According to the Lawn Institute in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, Americans spend \$30 billion a year on 50,000 square miles of lawn. I've paced the aisles of the local lawn and garden center looking for the latest products that kill weeds or pummel them into submission. The poisons have names like "Roundup," "Kick-Out Grass Killer" and "Weed-B-Gone" (in developing countries the names include "Machete," "Lasso," "Avenge" and "Pentagon").

There is a kind of insanity about all of this. When I read the warning labels on these herbicides, I discover that besides being highly inefficient or ineffective, these poisons can be applied indiscriminately and at the wrong times. They seep into our soils and groundwater, poisoning whatever they touch. What we've called "lawn care" sounds more like "lawn warfare." Our lawns are battlefields. I think of the signs put out by companies like "Chem-Lawn" advising us to keep pets and young children away from freshly sprayed lawns. These products kill on contact. Do we really want to apply millions of gallons of them every year to land that we "live on"?

Sometimes I dream of a kingdom of heaven that is made not of pearly gates and streets of gold, but of lawns—fields, rather, where people play without fear that what they are playing on will cause birth defects or skin rashes. I imagine lawns and gardens that smell fragrant and don't cause respiratory ailments. I see bees and butterflies and earthworms everywhere because their habitats have not been destroyed. This is a peaceable kingdom where the full variety of God's creative

powers is on display in a bewildering diversity. Here creatures are not enemies but co-contributors to the fabric of life.

With this kingdom in mind, lawn care becomes a theological issue. Our treatment of lawns—what we think should be in (or out of) our lawns, as well as the methods we use for achieving results—is fashioned from our understanding of creation, and of God’s intention for creation. The issue becomes even more pressing when we understand that lawns are microcosms of all of creation. Our pattern is to burn, bulldoze, chop or spray our way to success in forests, grasslands, agricultural fields and watersheds. Our history of settlement suggests that we see creation as an enemy we must either kill or thoroughly subdue.

But whereas in the past we could simply move on to more “virgin frontier” after we’d ruined the land we compromised or destroyed, we can do so no longer. We now need to face the results of our aggression: “dead zones” in the oceans from herbicide and fertilizer overuse in agricultural regions; water unsafe for drinking; soils incapable of supporting organic growth or promoting natural healing because they are devoid of microbial life; forests dying from the toxins of power-generating plants that have not been updated with the latest scrubber technology. The use of poisons is omnipresent. As Wes Jackson puts it, “We hammer the soil [with poisons] and then put it on life support [with yet more toxins]!”

The problem is that unlike God’s creative power, which enables diversity and freedom and makes space for creatures to thrive, human power is ruthless, and depends on subverting or undermining things. Our power, in other words, is maintained at the cost of the freedom of creation, while God’s power (see Job 40-41) welcomes and rejoices in a wild Behemoth or Leviathan.

Our increasing mastery of the created world has resulted in vast monocultures and the loss of species diversity. We do not tolerate or appreciate the complexity of living systems, so we simplify them into vast, unbroken, uniform fields of corn, wheat and rice —and thus compromise their vitality and health. Ecologists tell us that habitats and species are much more resilient if the diversity within them is maintained. They will be more successful at fending off disease or surviving climatic or topographical change.

Our planned landscapes—lawns are a prominent part of them—represent the monoculture ideal. We prefer uniformity—and a “weed” or “pest” is defined as any

plant or organism that interferes with the ideal. Monoculture habitats, reflecting the narrow genetic pools we increasingly rely on for food production, are highly vulnerable, which means that we apply greater and greater amounts of herbicides and pesticides to keep them going. The result is a vicious circle. We destroy diversity, and then try to preserve the vulnerable species that are left by pumping them up with dangerous fertilizers and steroids that have harmful side effects.

The logic of our power is at cross-purposes with God's plan. God's creative work is good and life-promoting —God's presence upon the face of the earth is welcomed as "good news" because it maintains creatures in their being (Pss. 65, 104)—while the work of human hands often leads to creation's distortion or destruction.

It does not have to be this way if we believe that the redemption of Christ encompasses the whole creation, if the peace made possible by the blood of the cross extends to "all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Col. 1:20).

Does this mean that I should welcome thistles, quack grass, knotweed and the many forms of clover into my lawn? Not necessarily. The lawn is a *cultural* invention, after all, whose success has often depended on resisting God's creative ways. Our goal should be to learn what these ways are and then work to cooperate with them. My lawn can become a healthier and more resilient place that welcomes a variety of species, plant and animal. If I decide that thistles are simply not what I want, then I owe it to my children and my neighbors, even God, that I control them in ways that are ecologically benign.

God's creative work was once described by John of Damascus as one great act of hospitality, a supremely generous gesture of "making room" for another. Could our lawns come to resemble sites of divine hospitality?