

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

Ah, the lovely summer sounds of singing birds blending with the chorus of crickets, frogs, and...every lawnmower on the block grating the air at once. Grass commands respect for its place in the circle of life, but its place in our life tends to be underneath the mower. There are several ways to make the grass “greener,” metaphorically speaking. You could reduce or eliminate your use of pesticides, cut back on cutting the grass at all, plant gardens, create habitat, or purchase a more environmentally-friendly lawnmower.

Depending on factors like the species of grass, temperature of the soil, amount of rainfall and sun, grass can grow at an average rate of 2-6 inches per week. If you don't mow every week during its peak growing season, your yard could get a foot tall in just two weeks! That adds up to a lot of mowing, which means an increase in polluting emissions and a decrease in free time.

Some people get around this problem by reducing or even eliminating their lawn. They replace grass with no-mow habitat or gardens. You could have areas of grass mingled with low-maintenance native woodland or prairie, depending on what's right for you and allowed in your location. A smaller-scale version for backyards is to just plant native perennials and native grasses in a section of yard, like a border area, and let it go wild while watching the wildlife enjoy new habitat. Native non-invasive species are best if you want the best outcome for the world and its myriad creatures (including us humans).

Another alternative is to keep the lawn and continue mowing, but with new gadgets. You can buy either electric and cordless battery-powered lawn care devices that can be charged with an alternative energy source (such as solar panels), or solar-powered mowers. Or, if you're feeling ambitious and have mechanical skills, build your own! (At least one reader has done so; it's not impossible.) There are online tutorials that can help.

Electric options have the advantage of not needing gasoline, not emitting stinky fumes, and they are often quieter than their counterparts (but not silent). If you'd like to buy an electric mower, Wal-Mart offers the \$75 Sun Joe Electric Lawn Mower with free 2-day delivery. The brand Greenworks not only manufactures an electric mower, but also a weedwhacker, pole saw, leaf blower and more in their various product lines based on voltage. There are many competing brands for electric lawn tools, so shop around until you find just the right thing.

Husqvarna offered a solar-powered lawn mower (with solar panels on the top) in 2008, but it seems to have been replaced by an electric robot mower that recharges once it gets low on power. There are many mowers in the research and testing phase, but I couldn't find any for sale online. Almost all the results were DIY mower conversions, or electric mowers, which places the burden on the consumer to use a cleaner energy source. But it seems that there is at least some demand for solar-powered mowers; they may become more widely available sooner than we think. In the meantime, there's a lot we can do to make ripples with our lawns. Having a green thumb is a good asset, but having a green heart is perhaps more important.

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