



Why does the grass on the other side always look greener?



Because the angle of vision obscures the brown spots.



lawn nation

art and science of the american lawn

Coming to the Notebaert Nature Museum in Chicago, May 16 – September 5, 2008



We are a nation of grass.

We are sixty million lawns, sixteen thousand golf courses, seven hundred thousand athletic fields, and a \$40 billion a year lawn care industry.

We are 169,625,789 backyard grills.

We are all the games of badminton, bocce ball, and croquet.

We are 250 gallons of water per person per day devoted to turf grass.

We are our campus quads, village greens, and town squares.

We are enough scattered lawn acres to blanket Kentucky.

We are a coast-to-coast green carpet that grows some 400,000 acres larger every year.

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overview

Lawn Nation explores America's love-hate relationship with turf grass from three different perspectives.

history How did lawn become the dominant American landscape? Who is responsible? What cultural, economic, and environmental forces made the lawn what it is today?

impact What does it mean to be here? What are some of the environmental, cultural, economic, and aesthetic affects of so much lawn and lawn care? Who suffers? Who benefits? What does lawn give us and what does it take away?

alternatives What lies beyond? What are some creative alternatives to turf grass and what are some of the more sustainable ways to care for the turf we've got? Who's got the best ideas for doing something different?

Lawn Nation examines the lawn from these three perspectives—which might also be thought of as past, present, and future—through a variety of media and installations, including a series of “This American Life”-style audio narratives, several documentary video projects, a number of photography-based flat shows, some outdoor lawn art, a miniature-golf piece, and a variety of lawn-related outdoor public events – picnics, bbqs, and croquet.

Most centrally, though, the exhibit will feature a series of artist-made installations meant to bring to life the lawn-related insights of a variety of scientists and academics.



request for proposals

The Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, in Chicago, seeks art and interactive installation proposals for *Lawn Nation: Art & Science of The American Lawn*, an exhibit set to open in May 2008.

criteria

Winning proposals are due by **October 31, 2007** and will outline projects, both serious and whimsical, that do one or more of the following:

- Explore the art and science of the American lawn
- Invite museum visitors to *actively* engage with the work
- Highlight aspects of lawn culture, psychology, or environmental impact

**send proposals to: Shane DuBow, Strategic Projects Manager
Notebaert Nature Museum
2430 North Cannon Drive
Chicago, Illinois 60614
sdubow@naturemuseum.org**

specifications

- The total indoor exhibit space measures 5,000 square feet and proposals will be accepted for installations of all sizes
- Outdoor space, on the museum grounds, is available
- Living art, both outdoor and indoor, is an option
- Artists must be able to install their own work on-site (some assistance available)
- Funds available for individual projects range from \$500 to \$7,000 depending on labor and material requirements. Less expensive projects, however, have a greater likelihood of being approved.

art & installation ideas


Give us your ideas! Exercise some demons. Get obsessed. Work with a lawn expert (scientist, academic, etc.) who we've identified or work on your own. We're open to a variety of approaches and media, but we invite you to consider the following ideas and idea starters as a place to start.

Note: All of these ideas are available for assignment. For questions regarding assignments, email sdubow@naturemuseum.org.

- **dynamic satellite mapping project** An installation that shows the historical spread of the lawn and it's current reach, coast to coast. Based on the work of NASA funded scientist and environmental researcher, Cristina Milesi, "Mapping and Modeling the Biogeochemical Cycling of Turf Grasses in the United States."

Milesi developed a formula for estimating turf grass area based on satellite imagery. Her work not only seeks to quantify the amount of turf grass currently planted (more than three times any other irrigated crop), but also to explore its impact on water usage and carbon exchange.

- **invasive species smack down project** A video/photo installation designed to document the interplay of invasive species (including turf grass) and native plants over time. The piece would require planting space, labeling of plants, and regular video/photo documentation to prepare a time-lapse final product.

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- **landscape preferences project** An installation meant to explore our landscape preferences and attitudes by exposing visitors to turf in different contexts. Imagine, for example, an installation that features a room of turf, artificial or real, with a different landscape projected on each wall and a means of tracking each visitor's location while inside the space. Do visitors seem to gravitate toward one wall or another? Are they attracted more to water features or open savannas or dense forests? Does placing the same expanse of turf in different contexts yield any insights?

The idea, roughly, would be to see if any inferences might be made about landscape preferences based on the areas most favored by those who enter the exhibit space. While the "science" of the data collection might very well fail any rigorous peer review, the installation would allow for a reconsideration of the work of scientists like John Falk who theorized a biological preference, in humans, for wide-open lawn-like savannas that afforded the chance to see predators and pray far off.

- **democratic yard project** An installation that draws on and/or tests the thinking of Frederick Law Olmsted and others who imagined a common democratic green space, in the form of a great lawn, that might unite surrounding private residencies and encourage a sense of shared community. The point here would be to explore the idea of the lawn as a social unifier, a tool for encouraging a certain sort of social contract. Conversely, the exhibit might also explore the sometimes burdensome community standards such a shared landscape can engender. How does a block of shared front lawns lead to aesthetic bullying, neighborly grievances, community "weed" ordinances, or a sense of peer pressure to adhere to what has now become a near default preference for weed-free turf? What happens to those who buck the system? How might we explore the good and the bad of lawn as a sort of tool for social engineering?



- **lawn psychology project** An installation that explores some classic suburban lawn conventions and myths. What, if anything, does a tidy front lawn suggest about the lives of those who live in the residence behind it? What does an untidy lawn suggest? How might we explore, say, the relationship of lawn care to real-estate values or political affiliations? Can we say anything about a home-owner's psychological profile from the lawn out front? Can we juxtapose chaotic personal narratives with tidy yards? And vice versa? Could we document the landscape choices of some famous Chicago dogooders vs. some famous Chicago villains?
- **lawn census project** A installation meant to work off the results of an already commissioned lawn census which seeks to document, as completely as possible, all the little live things one might find in the average Chicago homeowner's lawn.
- **what lies beneath project** An installation that illuminates the rich life going on below the soil. Roots, worms, etc.
- **lawn alternative project** An installation that highlights one or more regionally appropriate lawn alternatives like native prairie plants (see the work of Patricia Armstrong and the "Wild Ones") or fruits and vegetables (see the work of Fritz Haeg and "Edible Estates").