



Notes from the Underground

May 1

Make Your Slogan GIMBY

This is what the river looks like from our front yard. Of course this is what drew us to our present site, but there is much more to consider in sustainable building than just a lovely view. I really should finish my last post about site planning and vegetation as a way of decreasing your heating and cooling costs.



On a hot summer day, you can almost fry an egg on your driveway but nobody ever tries to do that in their garden. That's because plants are a lot better at buffering temperatures than concrete or blacktop. But the kind of plants you grow around your house says a lot about whether you are really sustainable or just like to talk a good game.

One plant that is definitely not sustainable is the normal turfgrass that makes up most lawns, unless you have an unconventional maintenance plan. On our farm, we sometimes tethered sheep around on the lawn. They were well fed and, at the end of the season, we ate our lawn mowers. In our new home, we are going a step further and growing plants that need no maintenance—not only in front of our house but on top of it, too.

In 1998 and 1999, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation studied the time, costs, and resources involved in planting and maintaining five conventional lawns versus four low-maintenance ones. Residents with low-maintenance lawns found many benefits:

- 50 per cent less time
- 85 per cent less money
- 50 per cent less fuel
- 85 per cent less fertilizer
- 100 per cent less water
- 100 per cent less pesticides per year than residents with conventional lawns.

Conventional lawns are typically made up of a small number of non-native fine turfgrasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass. To keep them green and manicured, many people neatly mow them at least weekly and regularly water, edge, fertilize, and treat them for pests (insects, diseases and weeds). All of this is time-consuming, costly, and resource-intensive.

These practices are not sustainable and create many adverse impacts:

- Increased water consumption. Municipal water consumption doubles in the summer, mainly as a result of lawn and garden watering. This lowers water tables and reduces stream flows, which affects fish and other aquatic life. It also increases costs for municipalities to supply and treat water and increases homeowners' water bills.
- Increased air and noise pollution. Electric- or gasoline-powered mowers, trimmers and other equipment discharge air pollutants and create noise. The Ontario Government estimates that running a gas-powered lawn mower for one hour can produce as much air pollution as driving a new car 550 kilometres. Push mowers are non-polluting and better exercise.
- Increased use of pesticides. Many Canadians are voluntarily reducing their use of pesticides and some Canadian municipalities restrict pesticide use. These trends reflect growing concerns about the potential health and environmental risks of pesticides.
- Increased use of fertilizers. Depending on the types used and site conditions, fertilizers can leach into groundwater and enter streams and lakes through stormwater runoff. This has negative consequences for water quality and aquatic life. Over time, fertilizer residue can lower soil quality.

One move that will make the landscape more sustainable is Ontario's Cosmetic Pesticides Ban that took effect on April 22 (Earth Day). The provincial ban supersedes local municipal pesticide bylaws to create one clear, understandable set of rules across the province.

Pesticides cannot be used for cosmetic purposes on lawns, vegetable and ornamental gardens, patios, driveways, cemeteries, in parks or on school yards. There are no exceptions for pest infestations (insects, fungi, or weeds) in these areas, as lower risk pesticides, biopesticides, and alternatives to pesticides exist. More than 250 pesticide products are banned for sale and over 95 pesticide ingredients are banned for cosmetic uses.

This is a sweet victory for us because 15 years ago my wife and I tried to convince the Oakville Town Council and Parks and Recreation Department to stop spraying pesticides on school grounds. We moved from there partly because of their poor record on human and environmental health.

There are some exceptions for public health, golf courses, sports fields, specialty turf, trees, agriculture, forestry, and public works. Homeowners can apply biopesticides or lower risk pesticides to control weeds and other pests on lawns, gardens, driveways and other areas around the home. However, if licensed exterminators use a lower risk pesticide or biopesticide, the exterminator must post a green notice sign on the lawn.

This new lawn pesticide ban will do much to protect human and environmental health. But it's also becoming clear the legislation will be a boon to our economy—boosting business and creating green jobs. Communities across Canada that already have pesticide restrictions have

enjoyed a major expansion of their lawn care sector. For example, in the five years following a pesticide ban in Halifax, the number of lawn care firms in the city grew from 118 to 180—an increase of 53 per cent, according to Statistics Canada. The number of employees in the sector also grew.

As well, StatsCan reports the number of landscaping and lawn care businesses in Toronto has grown each year since that city passed a pesticide ban. Ontario's organic lawn care providers are booming. Many organic lawn products (such as corn gluten meal, horticultural vinegar, compost, and beneficial nematodes) are produced right here in Ontario—which means more business for our manufacturers. By contrast, many of the toxic lawn chemicals are made in the U.S. or Europe.

It's clearly time to move to a low-maintenance lawn and that requires a shift in goals for some people from a perfect lawn appearance designed to impress the neighbours to saving time, costs, and our environment.

There are three steps involved in creating and maintaining low-maintenance lawns: selecting a suitable species mix, installation, and changing to less-intensive maintenance. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation has information on their website about [Low Maintenance Lawns](#) and the City of Kingston has very good information about [Natural Lawn and Pest Control](#).

Because our new home is essentially in the woods, we will encourage woodland species such as native grasses, ferns, mosses, wildflowers, low-growing shrubs, and perennials. Examples could be native vinca minor, periwinkle, sweet woodruff, sweet violets, lily-of-the-valley, and cotoneaster. Bugleweed, euonymus, and the unfortunately-named lungwort are also good candidates.

Consider ground covers instead of an unsustainable lawn. Once established, they require no work at all. Good low-maintenance groundcover plants for full-sun lawn replacement might include clover, creeping thyme, prostrate juniper, sweet woodruff, sedum, and yarrow.

Whatever you choose, there are many alternatives. I know this will rile some people, but a watered, fertilized, mowed, and sprayed lawn is a relic from the days when we didn't know enough to act sensibly. Trade in your gas-powered mower and your Kentucky bluegrass on a green lawn that is friendly to children and pets and doesn't waste our resources.

Make your new slogan GIMBY: Green In My Back Yard. You can be a good example of environmental responsibility for us all.

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