

Grass stains my imagination

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I knew that I was finally swimming in the American mainstream some years ago after I threw in the towel and bought a riding lawn mower.

This was a step up from my gasoline-powered, walk-behind mower, which, itself, had been a step up from the ancestral manual mowers that had exhausted recent ancestors, which had been a step up from the scythes that had ruined the backs of other ancestors for 2,500 years, which had been a step down from tethering clever herbivores in the front yard where they pulled off the hat trick of cropping the grass, enriching the soil and producing an occasional lamb chop.

The riding mower with its embedded cup-holder was the apex purchase that capped my growing pyramid of bourgeois concessions—automatic dishwasher, vacuum cleaner, microwave and electric toothbrush.

On the riding mower, I waved goodbye to my unencumbered youth and the fading remembrances of things past. I forfeited any claim to being a self-righteous environmentalist, a writer disdainful of money or an outsider. If we had a Moose Lodge in Blue Grass, I'd now have antlers.

And the worst part of giving in? I like our lawn mowed.

I didn't say I liked mowing.

It came as a surprise that Parkinson's Law applies—owning a riding mower expands the area that is expected to be mowed.

It was no longer good enough to cut the fenced-in yard and a little bit outside, which is how I had defined "lawn" in the days of the push mower.

"Lawn" metastasized quickly into more than four acres. It's the field where we park; it's around the pond; it's all of the non-garden garden; it's in front of the barns and outbuildings; it's around the horse trailers; it's even the long strip between the fence and Wimer Mountain Road.

Counting time to refuel, move the movable, curse the unmovable, pick up Nellie's contributions to lawn degradation, shift vehicles and free the mower's deck from clogs, cutting the grass now takes about four hours.

I don't mow weekly, though some here do. My tolerance for grass growth stops about three inches high.

I am particular about having the finished cut look good to my eye, but I'm not fussy about the grass itself. Green is usually good enough. I don't zap weeds or fertilize. I don't bag or mulch. I never weed-whack.

I draw a clear line between being a landscape compulsive and being happily inconsistent, which is the sweet spot of permanent contentment.

I also don't edge. It helps that we don't have a concrete walkway to the house. If we did, edging might crawl into my consciousness, die there, smell up the place and then bother me forever. I might be a Moose on the outside, but I still prefer my edges rough, even a little wild.

While I like looking at a just-cut lawn, I don't care much for riding the mower, partly because it's tedious and partly because it fully occupies my mind.

I always expect that mowing will give me four hours to think about something useful or, at least, daydream, which can be useful if you consider it a variant of brainstorming. In fact, I spend every minute paying attention to cutting the grass.

Efficiency demands that the mower travels over the same ground as few times as possible. Therefore, I have to concentrate on keeping the overlap between what has just been mowed and what is being mowed as narrow as I can.

I also have to avoid rolling the machine on top of me, getting it stuck in a ditch, mowing the pond (I've learned that the mower is not submersible or even amphibious), banging into trees and clipping Melissa's spring flowers (which, by July, are disguising themselves as weeds).

I'm sure you'll agree that riding-mowing is just a little harder than rocket science.

I don't need to mention that the riding the mower is raucous, even when I use my Mickey Mouse hearing protectors.

Riding is not like resting in a La-Z-Boy recliner. There's steering, braking, shifting gears, adjusting speed, balancing your weight to avoid rollovers, backing-and-forthing in tight spots and posting recriminations to the Heavens when rocks look lower than they actually are.

It's hot work and bone-rattling.

It's irritating. Airborne grass clippings make my eyes itch, which gets worse when I rub them, which I do because they itch. Grass not in my eyes settles on my head and back. I look like living artificial turf. There's no choice—I have to let the clips fall where they may.

Mowing is also whatever the opposite of "green" is, given the exhaust pollutants from burning gasoline.

Some argue that blades of grass feel pain when cut. They are said

to suffer silently...unlike the parts of my lawn that are home to certain high-strung and highly vocal rocks which accuse me of neglect when I manage to avoid visiting them with the mower's blade.

And what's the one thing worse than mowing the grass? It's having the mower refuse to start when I'm ready to cut.

So why mow the yard grass at all?

I think it has to do with pretending that some small outpost of temporary control can be carved out of and imposed on the surrounding chaos that threatens.

It also has to do with the fact that Melissa would be unhappy with me if I let wilderness beat a path to our front door. She did not sign up for Survivor: Blue Grass.

And I wouldn't be surprised if she had an edger in the back of her closet.

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