



Above: from *Iconographie du genre Camellia* by Lorenzo Berlèse (1841), held by the RHS Lindley Library, a hand-finished plate of a camellia.

# So long to short grass

The Garden columnist and garden writer Nigel Colborn advocates new lawn management

In a few weeks time, spring will take her first, faltering steps. The weather will be fickle but you can be sure of one thing: on the first warm weekend, the songs of robin, dunno and thrush will be drowned by whirring, rattling mowers. Fine lawns are part of our national heritage and we love to fuss over them. But are we, I wonder, a little too obsessed with turf perfection?

Even as you read this, diehard lawn fanatics – usually men – will be honing mower blades and fretting about thatch. By Easter, they will have scarified, applied mosskiller, scattered fertiliser and doused their turf with herbicide. A single daisy will induce despair and if there is a drought, they'll start fantasizing about in-lawn irrigation systems.

The lawnsman's grass may be perfect but at what cost? Early nitrogen applications can harm beneficial soil micro-organisms before rinsing through topsoil to pollute ground water. And such a monoculture is devoid of nectar-seeking insects, wolf

spiders, beetles, turf flora or interesting fungi. Far from being part of a dynamic garden habitat, lawns become joyless, green, fitted carpets.

And yet, close-mown turf makes a beautiful floor. Grass is lovely between borders and creates restful open spaces; it can even reflect the rural landscapes where fields are bordered by hedges and trees.

Aggressively 'eco-green' gardeners tend to be anti-lawn but few of us, I suggest, would want to go that far. In my Lincolnshire country garden, grassy pathways and lawns seem to fit sweetly where paving would not.

But times have changed and we need to rethink grass culture. When we moved into our current garden, I vowed never to feed or weed my lawns, regardless of their

condition. After eight years the grass still looks fine. Part is laid down to meadow, which is full of life and thick with flowers. The remainder is close-mown and contains daisies which we love, clover which is handy for nitrogen replenishment, and weeds which are tolerated, rather than welcomed.

In a self-feeding lawn, minerals are recycled by having a sensible mowing regime – almost always with the grass box removed and blades set high. Despite never feeding, my turf looks pleasingly green and none the worse for containing the odd violet, self-heal or, dare I admit, dandelion.

Such a low-input regime could be taken further and used as a basis for

developing an entirely new style of grass-land management. At last year's RHS John MacLeod Lecture, Diane Pataki (Director of the Centre for Environmental Biology, University of California) pointed out that untiled, unfed swards are good for carbon

storage – some of which is lost again when mowing takes place. Semi-managed pasture, with longer grass, is therefore better for holding carbon and can be more biodiverse.

So, perhaps we should try introducing variable height lawns. In my garden, 'fine' grass is mown weekly while the meadow remains untouched until autumn.

But why not have close-mown areas where they are essential for design or utility, and longer grass where length matters less?

Lionel Smith, winner of the 2011 Marsh Horticultural Science Award (see p81), is working on the idea of flowering lawns. What a boost for biodiversity such things could be, and how beautiful. Imagine trees with drifts of foxgloves and *Campanula trachelium* in their shade... transforming through woodland margin flora... on to sunlit flowery meadow... and finally, in the well-trodden parts of the garden, to cropped, flower-studded turf. You could achieve that on almost any scale, too.

Is there a place, in these anxious, carbon-conscious days, for a fine lawn? Would we mourn the neat mowing stripes and delicious smell of fresh, cut grass?

Of course we would, and there's no need to lose them. In our garden, the tiny space that we (pretentiously) call the Tea Lawn has fine turf. The grass is interwoven – let's not say infested – with white clover but it looks neat and green and makes a cooling, calming foil for the floral exuberance of the surrounding borders. ●

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