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Uncovering the Seeds of a Post-Lawn Future

Two artists are on a mission to replace the monoculture of the turf lawn with “leafy green goodness” from seeds that lie dormant in the soil.



Uncovering a plot as part of a workshop with Community Miracles in Action in Cohoes, New York, in 2018. *Courtesy of Next Epoch Seed Library*

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The many problems with the great American lawn are well documented: Lawns guzzle water, promote the use of fertilizers that contaminate water, lower biodiversity, and are labor-intensive, despite producing no food for humans and little for wildlife. (They also have an uncanny ability to spark tension between neighbors.)

Many lawns are what's known as a monoculture, in which one plant is exclusively cultivated. Those plants are often non-native turfgrasses such as Bermuda grass from Africa and centipede grass from Asia, which require care to maintain. These offer few benefits to animal species, whereas "weeds" like dandelions and clover are major resources for bees and other pollinators.

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Yet below the orderly green grass of the country's front yards, football fields, college quads, and golf courses, seeds of an unrulier nature are waiting for their time in the sun. They are patient, able to germinate after decades beneath the manicured turf; they are tenacious, the types of plants that burst out of sidewalk cracks and flourish amid construction rubble.

Two artists are pushing against the popular idea of the lawn by dissecting it, one square meter at a time.

Lawn (Re)Disturbance Laboratory is a project by Ellie Irons, based in Brooklyn and Troy, New York, and Jersey City's Anne Percoco. It's part of their collaborative Next Epoch Seed Library initiative. Irons and Percoco's investigations have ranged from touring a pop-up seed library to burying time capsules of seeds. They focus on collecting seeds in plant-unfriendly places, including Superfund sites and abandoned infrastructure, as a way to research the kinds of tough flora most likely to survive in an ecologically uncertain future.

"The *Lawn (Re)Disturbance Laboratory* is an extension of our deep-time storage experiments," Percoco said. "We became fascinated with reports of a

2,000-year-old date-palm seed that was sprouted in a lab and grew to maturity. We started to view seeds as tiny time-travelers.”

Lawn (Re)Disturbance Laboratory launched last year in Troy with several plots on institutional and residential lawns. This summer, Irons and Percoco extended the project to a series of plots at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, and Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, in conjunction with group exhibitions at each institution: *New World Water* (November 4 to December 13 at Seton Hall) and *In the Weeds: Art and the Natural World* (October 23 to December 12 at Wheaton).

In both places, they’re conducting indoor seedbank tests to study growth from samples in the exposed plots. Their goal is not only to examine a lost plant diversity, but to demonstrate how landscaped spaces could be rewilded, or allowed to grow into meadows.

The process for creating the test plots is simple. A square is cut and pulled back with a hand rake before the dirt is fluffed and mixed with potting soil to replace the turf. It’s then marked with a yellow pyramid or signage, which protects it from mowing and can draw the attention of citizen scientists, who can add their observations to iNaturalist.



A test plot at Wheaton College in Massachusetts in 2019. *Courtesy of Next Epoch Seed Library*

What emerges can be unpredictable. Irons stopped by the three Wheaton plots over Labor Day weekend, and although they're no more than 100 yards apart, they were distinctly different.

“One is totally covered in purslane, plantain, dandelion, spotted spurge, and carpetweed—all low-growing, mat-forming, or rosette-forming species—it’s a green carpet,” she said. “While another one nearby has lots of bare soil, but has five pokeweed plants coming up in it, which grow tall and bushy, and will have deep red berries if they get the chance to go to seed before winter. I didn’t see any pokeweed anywhere nearby, so I really wonder how long those seeds have been hanging out in the soil.”

Bugs seem to be responding to the change already. “Even a small one-by-one-meter rewilding becomes a magnet for insects,” Irons said. “In the more diverse plots—there were a few that had over 15 species in them—I found a lot more insects than were present in the surrounding lawn, from bees and ants to moths and spiders.”

“We started to view seeds as tiny time-travelers.”



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Many of the plants that have emerged in the *Lawn (Re)Disturbance Laboratory* are “pioneer species.” They are the plants that thrive following disturbances like earthquakes or construction activity, such as annual meadow grass, with its tufts of greenery that appear in vacant lots, and eastern black walnut, which flourishes on roadsides. That persistence and tendency to grow where they weren’t invited gets them designated as weeds, but that’s why Irons and Percoco celebrate them.

“Weeds have the superpower of being incredibly self-sufficient,” Percoco said. “They send out deep roots, deeper than grass, which allows them to pull in more water and nutrients. As a result, we humans don’t need to water or fertilize them.”



A before-and-after composite photo shows the progress of a plot in a residential yard in Troy over a period of about two months in 2018. *Courtesy of Next Epoch Seed Library*

In 2020, the artists plan to expand *Lawn (Re)Disturbance Laboratory*, with further research into soil temperatures, insect levels, and other changes that occur in these test plots. Although it's a small-scale project, each opening brings insight into a lawn's potential to better support local ecology.

The highly controlled, ornamental grass lawn has a long history in the United States. It was promoted by early landscape architects such as Andrew Jackson Downing, who praised an “unbroken surface of lawn,” and 20th-century suburban developers. (Abraham Levitt declared that of all community features, nothing else “contributes as much to the charm and beauty of the individual home and the locality as well-kept lawns.”) Hurdles

for rewilding lawns on a national level still include the regulations of homeowner associations and cities that fine residents for “neglected” lawns.

Percoco and Irons are trying to change that mentality where they can. “Because we’re doing this as art, it allows us to slip it into spaces it would never otherwise fly here in the United States,” Irons said. “I’ve been amazed that institutions with lawns are willing to let us rip them up when we frame it as sculpture. I’ve also been excited to talk with people about how the soil is alive—not just teeming with microbes, insects, and worms, but also with little dormant packages of plant life just waiting to burst into leafy green goodness, that can breathe alongside us, build soil, provide food and cover for nonhuman animals, and pleasure and health benefits to us humans.”



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