

## A Brief History of Lawns

It may be known by many names — turf, yard, green, sod — but there are *three key elements* to the definition of a lawn:

- It is an area of *grass* or mostly grass.
- It is *mown*, instead of allowing the plants to reach their full height.
- It is maintained for the benefit of *people*.

Lawns are not found in nature. People create and maintain them — around homes, in parks, and many other public and private spaces.



Illustration from Bocaccio's *La Teseida* (1460). Source: <http://gallowglass.org/jadwiga/pictures/gardens/teseida.jpg>

The first recorded lawns were in Europe in the middle ages. In *The Illustrated History of Gardening*, Huxley states:

“The first detailed account of preparing turf comes from a famous work called *Opus ruralium commodorum*, or *The Advantages of Country Living*, by Petrus de Crescentius, or Crescenzi. . . . In this work the author recommends digging out all weeds and roots, scalding the soil with boiling water to prevent further weeds germinating, and then laying turf brought in from the wild. Then the sods are

beaten with wooden mallets or ‘beetles’ (still used in laying turf today), and trodden with the feet until the grass is almost invisible, after which fresh, even growth should appear. The resulting sward should, he says, be cut twice a year; if it got out of hand it was simply returfed, which usually occurred every three or four years.”

These first lawns were filled with wild flowers, and low mounds of turf were created for seating, which were sometimes planted with aromatic herbs such as chamomile.

In the early 17th century, lawns began to be mown more frequently. The mowing was done by scythe, with shears used for edging. The lawns were also “rowled,” or rolled with large iron rollers. The 18th century brought the design of even more expansive parks and gardens in the estates of wealthy landowners. If you weren’t tipped off by the enormous manor house or castle, you would know by the vast expanse of lawn around it that the owner was very wealthy indeed. Lawns implied a staff of servants armed with scythes, brushes, rollers, shears, and edging irons. Some expanses of lawn were rolled using horses

with their hooves un-shod and covered with woolen mufflers.

The [invention of the cylinder or reel mower](#) in 1830 made lawn maintenance easier to achieve, but it wasn't until the growth of the suburbs in the early 1900s that lawns became widespread outside of parks, golf courses, and large estates. In modern America, lawns have become a cultural touchstone, a symbol of suburban living, and the passion of many homeowners.