

# The Generosity of Grass

by Dan Dinelli, North Shore C.C.

Life is full of so many wonderful things. We all tend to take some of them for granted. However, from time to time most of us tend to appreciate the warming sun, the cool rains, the laughter of a child, the beauty of flowers, the songs of birds, etc., etc. There is one thing I challenge, does anyone stop to appreciate, *grass*? Yes, that green fluffy stuff we swear at when it's time to mow. That green mantle of grass which possess some to nurture at any price; watering, fertilizing, controlling pests that may feed on it. It seems America is obsessed with the keeping of grass as a perfect lawn, but few seem to appreciate grass for what it is.

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Recognizing the importance of grass dates way back. "All flesh is as grass," the quotation from the First Epistle of Peter, goes on, "and all the glory like the flower of grass." Meaning, our physical being relies heavily on grass. Many animals including man depend on grass as a food source. Cows that give us our dairy products, graze on grasses. It is a grass that provides us with wheat, the most important single food crop in the world. Grasses come in many shapes and sizes. The grass family, is one of the largest plant families, composed of over 4,500 species. Several species are familiar to us; bent grass, blue grass, rye grass. Also included in the grass family are cereal grains like barley, rye, oats, rice, sugar cane and corn. What would beer be like without barley? What would come of Milwaukee?

Soil is another magical element few think of. We in the Midwest are blessed with deep dark soil. This area, known as the corn belt, is rich and high in organic matter. It took thousands of years to build the richness into the soil. The builders of this soil are the prairie grasses. Each spring, waves of russet leaves give way to the new. The old leaves and the extensive root system contribute annually to the compost, enriching the soil.

Much life revolves in and around turf. A grazing deer or rabbit may be seen on occasion. However, a more intense ecosystem occurs that few ever see. A very diverse insect community makes a living in turf, from grasshoppers, to beetles, to flies. Among the insects live the fungi, bacteria, and other micro organisms. This busy little world is what recycles the compost left behind by the grasses. This microbial activity also helps grass filter water. The dense mat of grass combined with the life around it offers the best bio-filter. Even some of the harshest chemicals are tied up and altered, resulting in cleaner water passing through.

Turf helps in trapping much of the estimated 12 million tons of dust and dirt released each year in the United States atmosphere. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recognizes the vast benefits of turf. It is recommended by the EPA for some sensitive areas to be protected with a dense stand of turf as a buffer. Examples are areas sensitive to run off and erosion. More watersheds are being protected by grass due to its ability to hold on to soil and filter pollutants as they pass through.

Carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide are major pollutants. These add to global warming and other changes in the environment. Grass is one of the best purifiers of these pollutants. An acre of grass absorbs hundreds of pounds of sulfur and carbon dioxide a year. For this, it makes sense to have a greenbelt of grass along roadsides. In the process of taking carbon dioxide, the plant gives off oxygen. A lawn area, 160 ft. x 160 ft., produces enough oxygen for a family of 4. This process is carried out in the plant's ability to photosynthesize. Photosynthesis is a complex process of building energy. One of the major elements is water. Water is taken in and given off as the plant transpires. This release of water into the atmosphere produces a cooling effect. Two acres of grass has the cooling effect of about 70 tons of air conditioning. The average size air conditioner for the home is about 4 tons.

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Grass contributes still much more to man. Ornamental grasses and lawns add value to homes as part of the landscape. Grasses offer a sound buffer. They also offer us a ground cover to enjoy many activities, from picnics in the park to athletic fields. It is no surprise that lawns cover over 50,000 square miles in the U.S. alone.

Man's strong desire to tame the world didn't overlook grasses. We try to maintain grass as home lawns, ball fields, and golf courses. Much effort is given to obtain a perfect sword of turf. Though, little respect is given to the single grass plant. One square foot of turf can be the home for over 850 grass plants. Knowing the generosity of grass, it is not asking too much to replace a divot, repair a ball mark, or perhaps tread a little lighter. It seems grass works hard adding to the fulfillment of life. The least we can do is return the favor.

## Simple Ground Squirrel Control

In past years, the Cadillac C.C. had a severe ground squirrel problem. The little buggers were everywhere, causing damage to all aspects of the course. Multiple commercial controls we tried, including traps and poison. They all had only superficial effects.

Then James Gautz, our Assistant Superintendent, came up with an idea that over time has reduced our rodent population to easily manageable levels. Jim built a wire mesh tube about 3' by 9' long and capped at one end. When employees had extra time they would take the tube and a jug of water out onto the course. When they spied a ground squirrel they would chase it down its hole. Next, they would place the tube over the hole and pour water through the tube into the hole. The squirrel would run up into the tube where it could be easily captured and disposed of. Often several squirrels would come out of a single hole. In the beginning large numbers (up to 75) of pests were taken in a single afternoon. Over a period of several years the rodent populations were greatly reduced. Now, three or four afternoons a summer on "gopher patrol" manages their populations.

**Jeffrey T. Dorrell, Superintendent, Cadillac C.C.**