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# Lawn People

*How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals  
Make Us Who We Are*

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*By*

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## Do Lawn People Choose Lawns?\*

**W**E HAVE SEEN THAT THE AMERICAN LAWN, while a cultural artifact, is one historically tied to the political economy of property and the creation of certain kinds of people. We have seen that as a green monoculture, the lawn absolutely requires certain repeated patterns of homeowner labor and the application of key inputs, which are by their nature hazardous. We have also seen that the promulgation of these inputs is increasingly required for a range of economic “actors”—all of whom are increasingly insinuated into the lives of consumers and who are concomitantly communicating specific messages not only about risk, but also about identity. Citizenship, ecological metabolism, chemical hazards, and economic imperatives come together every time someone practices intensive lawn care. For those people who participate in intensive lawn care practice—which is a majority of lawn owners—how are these several forces understood and reconciled? How do these people understand their behaviors in the context of their home, family, and community?

### Chemical Communities

The survey results briefly outlined in Chapter 1 tell us something in this regard: lawn chemical users are wealthier urban and suburban people whose neighbors tend to use chemicals, and who tend to be more worried about chemical usage than those who do not use them. This contradicts many of the most commonly used predictors of “green” conduct. Higher education, as an obvious

\*This chapter was written with the assistance of Julie T. Sharpe.

**TABLE 6.1** Survey Responses on Community and Chemicals: Direction of significant relationship, positive

Parameter	“Interested in Knowing What’s Going on in Neighborhood”	Believe “Neighbors’ Practices have a Negative Impact on Water Quality”
Lawn chemical use	+++	+
Neighbors known by name	+++	
Age		++
Education		+
Lawn care companies negative impact on local water quality		+++
Home owners negative impact on local water quality		+++

(+++  $p < .01$ , ++  $p < .05$ , +  $p < .10$ )

example, tends to coincide with higher use of lawn chemicals. As such, more careful examination of the survey results may be required, beyond the demographics of individuals, including responses that hint at the associations lawn people feel to a larger collective or community.

Considering people’s commitment to community relative to their lawn care behavior presents a more detailed, if more complex, picture (Table 6.1). Specifically, people who claim an interest in what is going on around their neighborhood and who tend to be able to list a greater number of their neighbors by name are far more likely to use lawn chemicals. This suggests that intensive lawn care is “neighborly,” in the sense that the more involved members of a community manage their lawns more intensively.

Assessing the relationship between people’s chemical use and their views of their neighbors’ impact on water quality complicates this picture (see Table 6.1). On the one hand, those who claim their neighbors’ influence on water quality is negative (whatever their neighbors’ specific behavior) tend to claim that homeowner practices are generally bad for water quality, especially the use of a lawn chemical applicator company. These people also tend to be older and better educated. Education and life experience indeed are reflected in environmental awareness, and a general feeling that what people do around the home influences the ecosystem. More importantly, chemical use is correlated with awareness of one’s neighbors and cognizance of environmental impacts. This is the case even when using multi-variate regression to consider and hold constant all the previously mentioned variables (education, income, etc.). These results are revealing, if a little counterintuitive. They contribute to a profile of chemical users as not only more socially involved and concerned, but also more aware of environmental impacts. They are more communitarian, but again more anxious.

### *Lawn Neighborhoods*

Add to this the fact that a majority of people (52%) surveyed *believe that their neighbors use lawn chemicals*. The effects of these uses, while considered deleterious for water quality, were also viewed as good for the community. While most reported that their neighbors' practices had no impact or negative impact on water quality, half also agreed that these practices had a positive impact on property values (Table 6.2).

As noted in Chapter 1, homeowners with higher incomes and higher property values are more likely to use lawn chemicals than homeowners with lower property values. The cost of lawn care chemicals certainly plays some role in differential use. According to the National Gardening Association, U.S. households spend \$222 each on lawn care equipment and chemicals annually, the marginal cost of such an investment; this climbs considerably in households with incomes less than \$30,000.<sup>1</sup>

The association of inputs with housing values (which accrue to the homeowner as well as the neighborhood more generally), suggests some obvious instrumental motivations not only for chemical application but for the positive association between such practices and community values. As most realtors will tell you, lawn upkeep is a relatively inexpensive investment for maintaining property values. In follow-up discussions, some lawn owners explicitly told us that their lawn care inputs were investments in their homes. Indeed, people with higher incomes and expensive homes have much more capital—in the form of an existing manicured lawn—to protect with chemical applications. Despite any expectation of social reward for environmentally protective behavior, homeowners are actually rewarded for environmentally detrimental behavior.

But instrumental thinking seems to only be a small part of this set of logics. Far more significant than the affect on property values, most respondents believed that their neighbors' lawn care behaviors had a positive influence on "neighborhood pride." This distinction implies something far beyond instrumental economic logic. The practice of lawn care is instead part of a normative communitarian practice. The unbroken, unfenced, openness of the front yard

**TABLE 6.2** Perceived Impact of Neighbors Behaviors on Local Conditions (percent of sampled respondents)

Impact of neighbors' practices	Negative	None	Positive
Water quality	34	49	11
Property values	6	41	50
Neighborhood pride	5	18	73

parkland—connecting household to household with no borders—is ultimately a form of common property, the maintenance of which is part of normative institution of community care. Participation in maintenance is a practice of civic good. Disregard for lawn care is, by implication, a form of free-riding, civic neglect, and moral weakness. This is further reinforced by the ecological character of lawn problems, including mobile, invasive, and adaptive species such as grubs, dandelions, and ground ivy. These pests, if eliminated in one yard, can easily be harbored in another, only to return later, crossing property lines, blowing on the wind, and burrowing underground. Intensive care by one party merely moves problems around; only coordinated action can control “outbreaks” and achieve uniformity. In this sense, lawn care differs from other kinds of individual investment in community, such as Christmas lights, painting, or other efforts. It is a far greater problem, requiring coordinated collective action, at least where green monocultural results are desired.

As such, intensive lawn management tends to cluster. If your neighbor uses lawn chemicals, then you are more likely to engage in intensive lawn care, (e.g., the hiring of a lawn care company or the using of do-it-yourself fertilizers and pesticides). In addition, lawn management in general is associated with positive neighborhood relations. People who spend more hours each week working in the yard report greater enjoyment of lawn work, but also feel more attached to their local community. Yard management is not simply an individual activity but is instead carried out for social purposes: the production and protection of neighborhoods.

Taken together, the picture of intensive lawn practice is not one of individual people making individual choices on their personal property. Instead, the evidence points to the profile of a highly regulated community. Lawn people are residents of lawn neighborhoods, relatively well-educated, high-income communities with expensive homes. Of course, these communities also share a collective anxiety, since chemical users do perceive a link between their neighbors’ behaviors (if not their own) and fouled drinking water. Since, however, in more concern tends to coincide with more use, it would seem that lawn communities are reading the boxes and bags of the products they use, communicating or quietly acknowledging risks, and then proceeding with a collective ecological project.

This kind of behavior raises as many questions as it answers. How are such risks and benefits reconciled in real life? What does such a community feel like to live in? Are such obligations seen as a joy or a burden? Does participation in the lawn community provide satisfaction or pressure? What room for maneuvering or the lack of participation is there? Do people trust the information they receive regarding lawn care, either from chemical applicators or from the packages they purchase? What are we like, those of us with deep personal and community investments in our lawn? Impersonal national surveys can only get us so far in answering these kinds of questions.

## The Lawns of Kingberry Court

To get some insight into how people actually reconcile individual benefits, community priorities, environmental hazards, and personal risks, we conducted intensive, face-to-face household interviews in a suburb of a large Midwestern metropolitan city. These eight resident families ring the cul-de-sac of Kingberry Court and were chosen both because of their relatively high socioeconomic status (matching the profile of the most likely chemical users) but also because they are all close neighbors, physically next to and across from one another in a nearly closed residential space. Their geographical proximity to one another meant they were more likely to know each other and that the lawn management activities of each would have a visual and environmental impact on each of the others. Treating this small group in a kind of “village study,” we hoped to get a view of the way a face-to-face lawn community functions, in an environment where mutual expectations are set through simply living daily life in close proximity.

Kingberry Court is an example of upper-middle-class life in a fairly average American suburb. Like many other Midwestern suburban developments, the area was converted from corn and soybean fields to suburban tract development, built in response to rapid suburbanization from the nearby city in the mid-1980s. Developers built eight houses on the cul-de-sac in 1987–1988, marketing the homes to professionals who wanted to escape the city and raise children in the higher-rated, well-funded schools of the suburbs. Legally located within the central city limits, Kingberry Court is particularly attractive to urban professionals because it straddles the boundary between city and suburb. The residents of Kingberry Court gain three kinds of advantages that typically make such developments attractive: a short commute to work, lower tax rates, and the benefits of suburban schools (demographic details are described in Appendix B).

Although the houses on Kingberry Court are larger and more expensive than average for its metropolitan region or for the United States as a whole, they fall under rather typical restrictions, taking the form of a stringent development charter to protect the market value of homes. Outbuildings such as sheds or detached garages are not allowed in the development, compost piles are not permitted because they may produce odors or attract insects, and even vegetable gardening is prohibited (because the presence of food in the yard is thought to attract local pest animals such as raccoons and skunks). Most of the residents of Kingberry Court do have small vegetable patches surreptitiously hidden at the sides of garages or near back property lines, but they are all aware they are operating in defiance of the community charter in doing so. Such charters (see Chapter 7) are extremely common for subdevelopments established in the last twenty-five years.

The people of Kingberry Court are themselves typical examples of upper-middle-class Americans. Six of the eight respondents interviewed hold advanced degrees and all eight households earn more than \$100,000 per year. Their

occupations include professionals (two medical doctors, one lawyer, and three research scientists with doctoral degrees) and business ownership (one owns a manufacturing firm, the other a construction business).

Each of the eight respondents is white, married, and has children. Seven of the eight respondents were male. Four of the respondents have been living on the circle since it was first completed fifteen years ago, and the other four bought houses between five and eight years ago. Their ages range from early thirties (the newcomers) to late sixties (original residents).

All of the eight residents use lawn fertilizers and pesticides. Walter, Arthur, Suzanne, and Frank<sup>2</sup> hire lawn care companies to spray fertilizer and pesticides on their yards at regular intervals during the growing season. The number of treatments per year range from two (Walter) to six (Arthur). Tom and Patrick are do-it-yourselfers. They both purchase the same pre-packaged fertilization and pesticide program from a home improvement store and apply the chemicals themselves that requires four treatments a year. Michael and Jason are also do-it-yourselfers, but design their own programs by purchasing different combinations and brands of fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides and applying them at their own rates, five or six times a year. Thus the residents of Kingberry Court also represent the more general profile outlined previously: socially elite homeowners who also tend to be lawn chemical users. With this in mind, we set out to determine whether these residents—lawn chemical users all—viewed the lawn as an environmental risk; whether they trusted the information they received regarding their yards; how their daily lives influenced their lawn care choices; and what responsibilities they felt to one another, to the environment, and to their yards.

### *Is the Lawn a Personal Risk or Environmental Hazard?*

In talking with these residents about their environmental commitments and concerns, it became clear that “green values” are complex and uneven commitments. Homeowners described varying levels of allegiance to “environmentalism.” Only three identified themselves as environmentalists, three were ambiguous about their concern for the environment, and two vocally declared no concern about environmental issues. Overall concern for and about the environment, however, was not a prerequisite for being concerned about the specific dangers of lawn chemicals or vice versa. Six of the eight residents described the potential risks of lawn chemicals, and expressed some uneasiness in using them.

Suzanne and Frank each identified themselves as “environmentalists” and discussed their general environmental ethic at length. They also identified themselves as recyclers and expressed concern about environmental issues especially including air pollution and hazardous waste. Frank explained,

We left our previous home because of a hazardous waste incinerator. We didn't want the kids around that. We try to do as much as we can



naturally, without the [lawn] chemicals. We put coffee grounds in with the tomato plants. We used to do composting back in the old neighborhood.

Walter, Jason, Arthur, and Patrick expressed ambivalence over their concern for the environment and espoused a middle-of-the-road approach to environmentalism. Walter described the contradiction these four all felt between protecting the environment and maintaining the look of their yards:

I would call myself an environmentalist, but there are different kinds. I am not strict. If I had an outbreak of bugs that were going to kill the trees I've worked on for twenty years, there would be no question that I would spray to get rid of them. I would use lindane, even though it's illegal, because I have worked on those trees for decades. But I try to keep from doing any more spraying than I have to.

Arthur echoed these feelings with his statement,

Of course I am concerned about the environment. Of course there is always a little bit of a risk [when using lawn chemicals], but it is small enough that it is not going to stop me.

When we asked Patrick if he would call himself an environmentalist, he said,

I would be right in the middle. I'm surely not going to strap myself to a tree to save it. But I would vote for someone with a strong environmental record. You know, I try to recycle. But I don't do anything to extremes. I just try to do my part.

Michael and Tom flatly denied any concern over the environment. As Michael said,

I'm no environmentalist. I use all the chemicals I can. I don't care about chopping forests down. There's plenty of wood and everything. I'm not one of these organic farmer type guys.

Certainly, our conversations underlie the fact that that a direct relationship between socioeconomic status and environmental concern cannot be assumed. Michael and Tom, the least environmentally conscious residents of Kingberry Court, were the most highly educated (Michael) and had the highest income (Tom).

Even so, six of the eight residents, including four who would not accept the label of environmentalist, expressed concern over the dangers of lawn

chemicals. Only Jason and Michael said they had no concerns at all about the chemicals they were using. Jason said he was using such a small volume that his chemicals posed no hazard, and Michael, a (medical) doctor, insisted that lawn chemicals simply were not harmful. The remaining six residents' anxieties centered around three more specific concerns: children, pets, and the wider environment.

### *Children, Pets, and Nature*

Walter, Suzanne, Tom, Patrick, and Frank all expressed concern over the impact of their use of lawn chemicals as specifically being concerned about the children in the neighborhood. Frank does not let his children into the yard for several days after a treatment. Suzanne talked about some of her friends who have stopped their treatments because they have small children at home. Tom said,

Certainly I've been responsible over the years when there were younger kids in the neighborhood. I made sure they weren't getting on the grass, and put those little flags up, keeping them off so that they don't walk through it and put it in their mouths.

Walter talked about his grandchildren:

I try not to go out there and zap things all the time. I am particularly conscious about it because I have an autistic grandson. Nobody knows what triggers that. He's always smelling the roses, and I'm thinking, did I put something on there that's going to make him worse? I want a nice looking lawn, but I don't want to endanger my kids walking across it.

As noted in Chapter 1, Suzanne's anxieties extended to her dog, though not to the point of changing her lawn care behaviors. Similarly, Patrick, Walter, and Frank all expressed concern over the impact of their chemical use on their dogs. (Tom did not have any pets). Frank explained that his dog is not allowed outside for several days after a lawn treatment or until after it rains. Patrick said:

Six or seven years ago there was a big debate in our paper about what some of the chemicals were doing to the animals. Dogs, lymphomas, things like that. That was an awareness thing for me: I'd never heard of that.

Patrick, Arthur, Walter, and Frank all expressed concern about the impact of their chemical use on wider ecological relationships in the region. Frank described the problem of runoff and drew a comparison between farmers

fertilizing their fields and homeowners fertilizing their lawns, both of them contributing to water quality problems. As Patrick said:

It all just runs off in the sewers. So you want to make sure you are putting as little as possible into the ecosystem . . . There is that consideration, where does all this go, potentially, eventually? Maybe it's washing off into the river system. I do a lot of water sports, so I am concerned about that.

Walter told a story about his son's job at a local golf club:

My son worked at a country club north of here, and I saw what they did. They were putting diazinon on. It rained, and it killed all of the ducks at the country club. The country club didn't want anyone to know about it, so they hired him [Walter's son] to put them all in a dump truck and take them away. And I'm thinking, geez, you know there's some really horrible environmental effects here. Obviously, if it kills ducks, it kills fish too. It says that on the bag [of pesticide], but you know you don't pay much attention to that. Still, it goes down the drain. I want a nice looking lawn, but I don't want to endanger any [wildlife].

What do these stories tell us about the environmental awareness of lawn chemical users? To begin with, there is a prevalent and apparently deep anxiety about the environment associated with lawn care, even amongst people without "environmental" concerns. These anxieties are most commonly expressed and experienced at a personal level, especially concerning children and dogs. Even so, these anxieties do little to curb behavior. The case of Suzanne, who would rather tie booties on her dog's feet than change her lawn care practices, is a somewhat extreme example.

These concerns, we have shown earlier, are specifically more pronounced amongst people who use chemicals than people who don't. Most obviously, it is because chemical users read (or at least glance at) the bags of chemicals they apply, as Walter explained. But where does most chemical information come from? Is it trustworthy? How is it reconciled with the pronounced anxieties of lawn managers? Why use chemicals about which you are so anxious?

### *Trust in Experts*

Our group of neighbors together told us three typical stories to explain their use of lawn chemicals despite knowledge of their hazards. The first of these—centering on trust in professional experts—was most common, since several residents employed other people to manage their lawns. Generally, residents believed that because lawn chemical producers and the companies that apply

chemicals are acting in a professional capacity, environmental risks are reduced or eliminated. This trust in the expert status of members of the lawn chemical industry was used to transfer responsibility for lawn chemical dangers from individuals to the industry itself.

Trust in experts was an important factor for Frank, Arthur, Suzanne, and Tom. Frank, Arthur, and Suzanne all placed environmental responsibility for treatments with their lawn service companies. For Frank and Suzanne, this trust was facilitated by their own self-proclaimed lack of knowledge of the technical details of treatments. As Frank explained:

I don't know their job, but they seem to know their job. We really don't know the impact of what they are doing. . . . We've had a variety of bugs eating something. I don't know what they were. I don't know what they spray with . . . When they come out they just look and see what they need to do.

The guy that does our chemical treatments was a botany major at [local university]. That makes us feel better than if there were some teenage kid that doesn't know anything about anything doing our lawn . . . These guys seem pretty safe. They seem very professional. We trust the people we are paying to put it [the treatment] down. They know what they are doing.

Arthur echoed these sentiments:

Of course, I am concerned [about the environmental impact of the treatments]. But I have had a discussion with the head of our fertilizing company and he pretty much assured me that the amounts and the way we are doing it, plus the professional manner in which they do it, that I am not worried. We are not overdoing it.

Suzanne reiterated her own lack of knowledge and her willingness to place technical responsibility on her service company's shoulders.

[The company] comes out and does our fertilizing. When they find some bugs or something they just spray and leave us a note. We've used them for years, so they just go ahead and do whatever they need to do.

Tom placed environmental responsibility with the company that manufactured his four-step program.

I rely on the fact that I buy [this brand of] products. They're a big company so they should be environmentally responsible. I rely upon their expertise to put these products on my lawn.

When asked if he would ever switch from his current treatment program, he replied:

I guess I've just grown accustomed to using [this brand]. I've had good success with it, feel like it's a good product, it's worked well. So, I'd just stick with that out of brand loyalty.

Tom is the owner of a small manufacturing company himself. He spent a portion of the interview describing his company's recent efforts to reduce waste and increase recycling in production processes, viewing this effort as integral to the company's financial success. Tom's statements reflect an increasingly prevalent view that a successful business enterprise would by default also protect the environment. In this way, responsibility for the fate of lawn chemicals is tied to the manufacturer rather than the user, or perhaps more directly, to the free market economy. Environmentally unsound businesses cannot thrive or even exist in a complex and efficient economy.

Tom never asserted the possibility that he may be using the chemicals in the wrong way, at the wrong times, or in the wrong amounts. Tom also avoided discussing the possibility that the manufacturer itself may be causing environmental risk. Tom's story provides an interesting contrast to the liability claims of lawn chemical producers themselves, who assert that the environmental fate of lawn chemicals rests solely with the user.

For these four Kingberry Court residents (Frank, Arthur, Suzanne, and Tom), the professional status of lawn care service companies and chemical manufacturers goes a long way to ensure the safety of lawn chemical treatments. Whereas some scholars emphasize that modern Americans are increasingly skeptical of experts,<sup>3</sup> reconciling lawn chemical application with deep anxiety requires some measure of faith in the responsibility and knowledge of others. The importance that homeowners attach to the concept of trust in professional experts, moreover, is directly related to what this concept means in their lives. In this sense, the general tendency of applying lawn chemicals to be more likely among upper middle class professionals is linked to the professional character (and assumed legitimacy) of the professions such people occupy. Frank and Arthur hold advanced degrees. Tom, Frank, and Arthur all seemed to derive a strong sense of identity from their professions (business owner, chemist, and medical doctor, respectively). Suzanne also took pains during the interview to stress the career and status of her husband, a construction contractor. For these four at least, their sense of themselves as professionals is central. Because they are well-educated and successful in their own careers, they assume that other educated professionals must be good at their jobs, dedicated, honest, and forthcoming. This concept of skill in one's profession is understood to include taking care of any potential health or environmental dangers resulting from one's work. It is not clear if people doing other kinds of labor (e.g., waiting tables, washing dishes,

or answering phones) would share such faith in the expertise of others. The professional status of chemical-using communities plays a key role in reconciling environmental anxieties through trust in the corporate management of risk.

### *Qualified Mistrust*

Walter, who uses a lawn care company, and Patrick who is a do-it-yourself applicator, both openly distrusted lawn chemical companies. Walter explained his uneasy relationship with his lawn care company.

Right now I'm hiring [this company] to do my lawn. I did it all myself up until a year ago when I hurt my back. . . . Now they offer this program where they claim you can regulate your own stuff. . . . I tell them what I want on it, and they claim they follow my instructions. Now, whether they are really doing that, I am suspicious that they probably aren't. . . . I think I'm living under an illusion [that the treatments applied are safe]. They are using less of it than I would have myself, and I'm hoping they are putting on what I told them I want on there. . . . but I'm not 100% certain of that, nor am I certain that nothing at all might not be better than what I am doing now.

Despite his misgivings, Walter continues to employ the same company, however. And while Patrick and Tom both were do-it-yourself applicators and both used the same branded four-step program, Patrick further described some mistrust in the manufacturer, at least in terms of prescribed volumes. Patrick explained:

I use [this brand's] four-step fertilizer system. And I cut it in half. So I use a very low level. My wife is concerned about, with all the little kids, through the years, having fertilizers back there of a high concentration. So we initially had [a lawn service company], then thought that that might not be environmentally the safest thing to do. Plus, the expense. And I thought, [this brand's] four-step program and I just cut it in half and it seems to work fine. Hopefully I'm not putting on more than I need. And I figure it might be a little bit safer for the animals.

What motivates Walter and Patrick to continue to apply lawn chemicals, despite their misgivings about the safety of their actions? If trust in experts is crucial, but by no means unqualified, what motivates intensive lawn care practice?

### *Hectic Lives*

In explaining their use of chemicals, residents largely emphasize the pace of their lives. Four of the eight residents stated, with some degree of pride, how busy they and their families are with careers, hobbies, sports, and travel. This often

translated into a feeling that they did not have time to worry about lawn chemicals. Although they knew that lawn chemicals might have some dangers, and that they themselves might in fact be responsible for these dangers, they felt that they did not have the time to educate themselves in the technical aspects of lawn treatment or weigh the health and environmental impacts. This feeling was sometimes related to another theme that emerged from the interviews: for some Kingberry Court residents, yard work is boring and distasteful. In addition, residents suggested that, on balance, the yard simply did not play a major role in the life of the neighborhood. Both the reluctance to do yard work and the yard's lack of explicit importance probably contributed to these a sense that chemical treatments simply are not worth much consideration.

Walter, Michael, Tom, and Suzanne all emphasized that they did not have time to worry about treatments. Michael spoke about the demands of his eighty to 100 hour work week. Walter explained:

When I first moved here I was traveling a lot so I didn't have time to do much in my yard. I thought, my lawn must need something, so I was treating it . . . I think of yard work as a fun activity . . . But I just don't have the time anymore.

Tom had to cut his interview short because he was getting ready to go to his son's state championship soccer game. He commented:

To be honest, we have a very busy household here. Our kids are very busy with soccer and we do a lot of traveling for their sports events and such.

Patrick, Michael, and Jason explained that they did not enjoy yard work, and so they tried to spend as little time and mental energy on the yard as possible. Patrick explained:

I'm not as meticulous about the yard as maybe other people. I want the grass to be just barely alive in the summer so that I don't have to cut it . . . If I had to spend more than an hour a week [in the yard], it's getting to be too much. I like to do a little, just to spruce things up. But that is not how I . . . that is not my escape. I won't cut my grass twice a week and I won't edge unless I have to . . . [my wife] likes to go out and put in her hour or two a week. It works out real well. With both of us putting that kind of time in, it's not a burden . . . I like to put my hands in the dirt, *a little*. After a couple of hours, that's it, I'm done.

Jason said:

Mowing the lawn is fine, but all the other stuff I could do without . . . We certainly like the way it looks, but we wish it took a little bit less time

to keep it that way . . . It's an obligation for me. I'd choose to do many things before I'd go out in the yard.

Michael explained:

Cutting the grass is work. I've tried to pay people to come and cut it but our yard is so small, it doesn't meet their minimum. I hate the cutting . . . if I could find someone to take care of it reasonably, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

Without question, the incidental and taken-for-granted character of the lawn puts it at a low priority, at least for daily concern or worry. Somewhat ironically, this tends to lead to a defaulting decision to apply chemicals (or hire a company to do it), largely indiscriminately. The hectic lives of residents make the submersion of anxiety easier to reconcile. For several of the residents, this taken-for-granted character of the lawn is reinforced by an insistence that the lawn has little to do with the life of the community. At the same time all agreed that they knew their neighbors fairly well, the residents explained that interactions with their neighbors were more likely to revolve around children, careers, and hobbies rather than the yard. Patrick explained:

We know the neighbors pretty well. We have cookouts and we know each other. We have kids the same age . . . the conversation is not about the yard. That's not my main motivation to go over and talk to someone. Mostly it is about common aspects of kids and sports.

Suzanne, one of the more senior residents of the Court, described the neighbors' relationships:

Our street is very friendly . . . Our street used to do little street carnivals at the end of the summer because the kids all played together and the parents all were very friendly. So we are lucky. I don't know if it's that way everywhere.

Tom echoed these thoughts:

[We talk] more about the kids, school events, sports, athletics they're involved in, that kind of thing. Not necessarily what our yards are doing! Occasionally, if someone is doing something, you'll take notice of it, which is kind of the polite thing to do: 'Hey, I like that new tree.'

Walter said:

We talk about our kids and jobs just as much [as we talk about our yards]. We are so much older than most of our neighbors, so that makes a big



difference. A lot of my neighbors are in their forties and they are more or less interested in their kids, and that's it.

Jason described his interaction with his neighbors:

We more often talk about our kids or our jobs . . . We've never ever talked with Tom and his wife about the yard even though we talk quite a bit.

As Michael described it:

I never see them [the neighbors while I'm doing yard work]. We don't cut at the same time, don't do anything at the same time. If I'm out there in the yard, I gotta get it done.

Unsurprisingly, it would seem then that busy, professional, urban residents spend little conscious mental energy on the mundane arrangements of everyday life, especially something as trivial as the lawn. Despite misgivings and anxieties concerning lawn chemicals, therefore, the lawn is largely described as nominal and tangential to the pulse of the community. As economists have asserted, the use of lawn chemicals is a near unconscious trade-off for the return on increasingly scarce time in the harried lives of the leisure class: a nonchoice.<sup>4</sup> The lawn managers of Kingberry Court receive benefits from lawn chemical applications in the form of reduced mental energy and decreased time spent on the lawn. They have little reason to consider the potential negative consequences of the routine, every-day practice of chemical use. According to these lawn managers, the yard is seen as an incidental part of the taken-for-granted domestic scene. It is not worth discussing with the neighbors, and the work surrounding it should be minimized. Even if the yard was not so commonplace, any concerns about lawn chemical treatments would probably fall by the wayside, swallowed up in the hectic pace of professional and family life on Kingberry Court.

This may overstate, however, the degree to which the management of everyday life and its objects, like the lawn, is passive. The level of civic engagement embodied in the maintenance of the lawn in a face-to-face society like Kingberry Court suggests something else. Despite an insistence that the lawn is collectively trivial and tangential, there is a persistent moral responsibility tied to lawn care that no resident can deny.

### *A Moral Responsibility*

Indeed, our discussions with residents suggested this sense of a "neighborhood norm" of lawn management is the most important driver lawn chemical use. Six of the eight homeowners explained their decisions about lawn chemical use in terms of something that they owed to their neighbors. Four lawn managers also

described the ways in which the neighborhood itself actually forced certain kinds of lawn management onto individuals.

Patrick and Arthur described their lawn chemical use as something they felt they had to do to meet the expectations of their neighbors. Patrick explained:

I know that this neighborhood has a certain status. A certain look. I surely wouldn't want to ruin it for anybody . . . [I don't enjoy yardwork] But I do want it to look—you know, I want to fit in. I won't cut my grass twice a week and I won't edge unless I have to. I'm not going to have the most meticulous yard and a water sprinkler system. I'll water by hand, if I have to, occasionally in the summer. So I'd say I'm more of a follower. I want to do just enough work to fit in.

In explaining whether there were any circumstances under which he would increase his lawn chemical treatments, Patrick described his system of monitoring, which relied heavily on a notion of the view of his lawn by the neighbors. When weeds grow prominent,

I would feel really out of place. It's not only how the yard looks to me, but how it looks to the neighbors. If it's not in keeping with the neighborhood [then I'd have to spray more]. . . . I'm willing to go to the edge in this neighborhood [in terms of less mowing, letting a few weeds grow in], but I'm not willing to go to the other side and have big holes in the yard. It's funny you mention this, because my mom's yard [which is not sprayed] looks like that (big holes in the yard) right in the middle of [a nearby town], where if you don't cut twice a week you are a communist! It's like, oh man!

Arthur's wife, Helen, made an association between the value of her house, the number of weeds in her yard, and the character (and perhaps the ethnicity of the her next door neighbors:

I respect the whole neighborhood. I would not let the house run down. I would not let it grow up to look unseemly. That's just out of common courtesy. You want to keep up what you paid a heck of a lot for. You start to let it go downhill and then the neighborhood changes. Not that I mean by kinds of people, because we have all kinds here, all . . . nationalities. I just mean things start to go downhill . . .

Arthur added:

Everyone around here works very hard keeping up their homes. I wouldn't insult my neighbors by not keeping my house up.

Jason's wife, Karen, talked about a potential "backlash" from her neighbors if she failed to maintain the yard in a certain way. She said:

I think we'd get a lot of complaints [if I didn't do yardwork]. Maybe you might not hear it, but everyone here keeps their lawn looking nice. If you were the only person who didn't mow . . .

Walter spoke about a neighborhood backlash from over-treatment of the lawn, as well:

If something happens to your yard, the neighbors are on you. That's the reason I changed from [this lawn care company]. When they killed my yard and it went absolutely dead, I was ostracized around here. People wanted to know, what the hell are you doing? You are decreasing our property values!

Frank said he himself felt insulted by his neighbors' yard maintenance, or lack thereof:

Everybody around here, they'll put out a few marigolds, a few impatiens, just enough to dot the landscape . . . We get kind of irritated when people don't do something with their yard. I get mad if people don't put plants out to make their front yard look nice.

It would seem that although Kingberry Court residents insist that lawns play little overt role in the neighborhood and are rarely the topic of discussion or serious consideration, front yards influence, and are heavily influenced by, an overarching sense of neighborhood monitoring. In fact, the actions and opinions of the neighbors suggest that residents have a comparatively small range of actual choice in the management of their lawns.

Moreover, the direct actions of neighbors is repeatedly reported to influence how others treat their lawns. Michael and Frank both talked about a neighborhood outbreak of grubs which forced them to start using grub-control chemicals. As Michael put it:

We don't have a grub problem, but the neighbors all do the grub treatment and chase them all over here. So, we kind of have to do it.

Collectively, this arrangement of lawn care begins to assemble itself into a kind of community pattern, or an ordered neighborhood rhythm. In a prominent example, the decision to mow on a particular day emerges as a collective group nondecision. Suzanne explained:

The neighbors have a lawn service and their guy comes out on Wednesdays. So, I try to cut my grass on Wednesdays also because our yards

kind of flow together. And the neighbor behind us, if they see us out they will also cut their grass on the same day, to keep it all looking nice at the same time. . . . So we kind of keep an eye on each other, thinking OK, this is grass cutting day. And also keeping an eye on the weather. This Wednesday it's supposed to rain, so Thursday will probably be grass-cutting day this week.

Several lawn managers spoke about the imperative to mow in time for the recent high school prom. Limousines came to the cul-de-sac to pick up several high school students, pictures were taken on front lawns, and everyone wanted their yards to look perfect. Frank described the scene:

We were out cutting our grass at 9 o'clock at night in the rain, because the next day was prom for the neighbors' kids. I was going to let the grass go for a couple of days, but after talking to Suzanne, whose daughter was going to prom, I thought I better cut it today. So if we know people are going to have parties, we try to cut the lawn [the day before] just so it will look nice.

Sometimes, the actual tasks of lawn management themselves are taken over by other residents. In these situations, not only decisions about lawn work but actual carrying out of tasks is out of the hands of the homeowner. Walter describes two experiences:

We recently had a hailstorm and one of my neighbor's said, 'I was going to come over and pick up your [fallen] branches.' He thought I was a little slow getting to it because I am too old.

My neighbor here [Frank] was having some problems with his job, so my son and I mowed his lawn for him. We didn't ask, we just mowed it. I knew he was under a lot of pressure and needed help.

Whereas the above described behaviors are concerned with planting and mowing, chemical treatments are also greatly influenced by the neighbors. When we asked Suzanne why she continued her lawn chemical treatments even though her dog's paws were bleeding, she replied:

I guess we didn't want the yard to look bad when everybody else's looked so nice . . . You try to make it look as nice as you can, without offending other people.

Walter, another long-time resident, described himself as a "trendsetter" on the Court. He used a lawn chemical company when he first moved to Kingberry Court, and he says that all the other residents were soon following suit. When

he fired the service company a few years later, all the residents also dropped their lawn services. Walter explains:

If all of the sudden I want back to spraying my yard, they probably would too. It's very much a group activity around here. People come around and they ask you information, they are worried about everything. They know I am from [local college]; they see me as kind of an authority.

### **Risk Citizens, Contradiction Reconcilers, Networked Actors**

Taken together, the survey results and the stories of the people of Kingberry Court suggest a profile of people who apply chemicals despite anxiety, who are skeptical about chemical producers but have faith in those who produce and apply them, and who downplay the importance of the lawn in community life while setting their environmental schedules by the community lawn clock. Arguably, these urban residents together participate in a “lawn community.”

The behaviors and feelings of these lawn people fundamentally contradict apolitical theories of green citizenship, which hold that people engage in environmentally protective behavior to receive social rewards from the community. In research on environmental consumerism, such green behaviors are often described as a “social dilemma” in which individuals must choose to make small individual sacrifices for the common good. In this line of thinking, convincing people that their sacrifice is worth the group’s reward is the key to creating green behavior.<sup>5</sup>

The picture of lawn people and chemical-using communities suggests something else entirely, since individual sacrifices are made in the form of environmentally destructive behaviors that are rewarded by, or are at least in service of, community. Refraining from using chemicals on the lawn is a behavior that creates costs to the group, at least as perceived in chemical neighborhoods. The maintenance of a weed- and pest-free lawn requires some personal sacrifice and potential risk, but results in a shared good, enjoyed instrumentally (in housing values) and more abstractly (through social cohesion). Using lawn chemicals confers social rewards on the user. A well-maintained lawn is a sign of good character and social responsibility, a commonly expressed and central countervailing incentive for chemical lawn care, despite known and acknowledged risks. Input of labor and even the application of chemicals that people may regard as environmentally problematic are sustained as a form of collective action, driven both through an impulse towards collective good and an urge to avoid being non-cooperative, lax, or antisocial. Three further things are also evident.

First, the inherent hazards of community maintenance through intensive lawn care are largely reconciled through qualified anxiety. Keeping in mind that

people who do not worry about lawn chemicals are the ones that do not tend to use them, lawn people (such as those in Kingberry Court) are by their nature anxious. They acknowledge uncertainties and hazards, especially those rooted in their own behavior. Are their applications hurting their pets, their family, their neighbors? When ultimately this worry is externalized by a qualified faith in chemical capitalism, for most members of such communities, proper citizenship involves ongoing inner dialogue concerning the hazards that are inherent in the practice of everyday life.

In this way, lawn people are model citizens of Beck's "risk society." As risk is individuated—both by the reduced regulatory responsibilities of the state and the risks shed from corporate to consumer spheres—lawn people shoulder the burden of a range of new choices. They are reflexive about their decision making, however, constantly evaluating the complex choices that new technologies present, and reconciling them with the priorities of their community. It further underlies Beck's point that, since the modern individual is compelled to his individual responsibilities in a larger context, a community of individuals emerges: "individualization thus implies, paradoxically, a collective lifestyle."<sup>6</sup>

Second, people who practice intensive lawn care do, to some degree, resemble the rigid caricatures in advertising photos promulgated by the chemical industry. As suggested in "pull" marketing, these lawn people are dedicated to family and community and they feel obligations of stewardship to the landscape itself. Clearly advertising does not *produce* this effect, however, since the source of such behaviors is rooted in the social community and the landscape. Even so, the mutual mimicry of the social-communitarian subject and of the economic-consuming subject is relevant to our understanding of the lawn, which serves as a bridge between the two. Desire and community obligation cannot in themselves be marketed as commodities, after all, as deeply held "feelings" they provide no outlet in and of themselves for economic growth or accumulation. But as embodied in intensive lawn practices, such desires can be bought or sold to provide an industrial source of revenue and a sink for risk. To produce and maintain this link between consuming and participating, the lawn industry projects back to lawn people images of communities that can be actively achieved through hard work and the right commercial products.

Advertising neither actively creates turfgrass subjects nor passively represents them, but instead creates a discursive connection between people's image of themselves and the industrial image of the lawn, maintaining the flow of chemicals that is essential to the survival of beleaguered formulator and applicator firms.

In this sense, lawn people are the ultimate logical participants in O'Connor's ecological contradiction of capitalism.<sup>7</sup> As noted previously, O'Connor emphasizes the irreconcilability of accumulation and sustainability. The implications of this contradiction, it would seem, are not merely a series of ecological crises (though bear in mind that chemical production does produce acute site-specific

problems that have drawn the attention of regulators [see Chapter 5]), but are also the constant shifting of responsibility for this contradiction to the point of consumption. Here, individual people—instead of firms or even states—become responsible not only for consuming surplus goods and services, but for experiencing and regulating the externalities that result.

The rhythms and behaviors of these neighborhoods, although enforced by human communities, are dictated by the pattern, pace, > and specific ecological needs of other species. Lawn grass has at its disposal not merely the labor of individual homeowners (who might at any time neglect to mow or spray for grubs on an ad hoc basis) but instead an entire social machine, organized to enforce and make regular all of the practices necessary for turfgrass growth.

Lawn people are, therefore, also perfectly enrolled participants in actor-networks. The turfgrasses to which they are linked (many of which are already evolutionary beneficiaries of grazing ecologies of previous imperial ecologies [see Chapter 2]), benefit from lawn chemicals and demand the labor of lawn people. Lawns, in this sense, are not simply plots of grass, but instead are a fixed cluster of grasses, chemicals, and people: a form of socioenvironmental monoculture.

But alternatives exist. A cottage industry for reform has emerged in recent decades to provide a menu of antilawn options for urban residents. Do these practices represent real alternatives? Are they realistic under the current legal regime? Or do alternatives simply reinstitute the position of lawn people as the lonely adjudicators of a larger socioeconomic machine?