

# **Honey, I'm Not Going To Cut The Lawn This Year**

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It was just about this time last year that my wife announced that she was no longer going to cut our lawn; instead, she wanted to let it go wild.

Having earned my way through college manicuring lawns in suburbs where the height of a lawn was proportional to one status and wealth, her pronouncement did not sit well with me. The way I looked at it, I had four choices, umm ... actually three, as telling my wife she had to continue to cut the lawn was not an option - period.

First, I could cut the lawn myself, something I hadn't done in years and was loathe to do, given my over-booked schedule. Second, I could try to hire a kid to do it; but as we live out in the country, I would have to depend upon kids with cars, not exactly the type interested in cutting lawns. Third, I could acquiesce to her suggestion and let the lawn grow wild.

Swallowing my pride and kissing away any hope of winning first place in the shortest cut lawn category, I drained the oil in our riding lawn mower, rolled it into a shed and covered it with a tarp.

Secretly I hoped that once the lawn began to look ragged, my wife would reconsider her decision. After all, she had spent years planting flower beds throughout our property, beds which the lawn, when mowed, highlighted nicely. "Surely she'll come to her senses," I thought.

By the end of the third week of her "strike," things were not working out as planned. The lawn was pushing a foot in height, and neighbors were beginning to notice. "Hey Mike, what's the matter? Your lawn mower on strike?" one neighbor quipped. "No, my wife is." I replied, hanging my head in shame.

By the end of six weeks, the lawn had begun to take on a wild, disheveled look, the sort of look an abandoned house has. Every time a car slowed and fingers pointed, I would run for a hiding place. I hated to think what the occupants were saying.

But like a bad haircut that turns out great once it grows in, by the end of spring, our lawn, or meadow, was beginning to show signs of great promise and I had to admit that my wife's reasons for not mowing were beginning to grow on me.

"First off," she said, "if we let the lawn grow, the soil will maintain more moisture which will help the trees and plants handle the long dry summer months better. Second, the tall grasses will offer cover and food for all sorts of wildlife, from song birds to chipmunks. Third, with all that wildlife in his own yard, Jordie (our cat) will no longer have to cross the road to do his hunting. Fourth, we waste a lot of water trying to keep it green, water which I can better use elsewhere in the garden. Lastly, lawn mowers are a significant source of pollution; and while ours doesn't contribute much in the big scheme of things, it nevertheless does pollute."

She was right. Our wildlife population grew in direct proportion to the height of the grasses in the meadow. And I do mean 'grasses' as it was soon obvious that the lawn was not made up of one type of grass, but many grasses, all with their own unique shape and growing pattern. The native Switch Grass (*Panicum virgatum*) which I had never noticed before, grew like wildfire. Each morning its beautiful sheaths glistened with dew and in the evening waved in gentle night breezes.

As the summer wore on, it stayed green and lush, overtaking the non-native species I had so painfully seeded and re-seeded over the years, which withered and died under the sun without their accustomed supply of water. When in the spring people were stopping to gawk at the "jungle," they now stopped to admire the island of green. As my wife predicted, the tall grasses had helped stem the evaporation of moisture from the soil, allowing the trees and shrubs to draw upon it in the summer. Where leaves of neighboring trees hung like limp rags, ours held their leaves out, grasping every sunray they could manage.

The once sterile yard teemed with birds of every shape and size hunting for the bugs that now crawled the moist surface. The songs of the birds filled the air from dawn to dusk, at which time they were joined by the squeaks of bats that had come to partake in the bounty. Many a night we lay in bed listening with pleasure to the birds chattering about their day's events.

As for watering, she was right there, too. For years I had fretted about drawing down our well trying to keep the yard and gardens green. Last summer was different. Not once did I have to haul out the sprinkler, and what water the gardens did need was more than supplied by the rain barrels attached to our down spouts.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention that yes, our cat did take quite a fancy to having his own private savannah. If he wasn't hunting for that vole that always seemed to elude him, he was basking in the sun in a bed of tall grass as if he were truly one of the "big cats" back in Africa.

In late summer, when a dead tree trunk, covered with native Virginia Creeper vine (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) that provided berries for the birds in winter, finally fell, I didn't object to my wife's decision to allow it to lay where it had fallen. "The trunk will give the birds that are not ground feeders a place to sit while they eat or rest. Besides, it's

full of bugs that will attract woodpeckers." Again she was right. When fall arrived, the trunk was lined with birds as they feasted on the yard's bounty.

When the last snow of February was in all its glory, outside my window the outlines of the little green paradise my wife had created when she ended her lawn cutting career could still be seen, anchored by the tree trunk now serving its final purpose in life. That day, its purpose was to provide a stand for a beautiful red tail hawk who, attracted by the wildlife visiting the yard, has come to hunt its evening meal.

I think it is safe to say that my wife's decision not to cut the lawn was a good one. Nature has reclaimed our yard, and our yard is a better, healthier, and more beautiful place because of it.

This summer when I drive by well-manicured lawns, I'll not look on them with envy, but with sadness, for I now know what potential yards have if we allow Mother Nature, the best and most qualified gardener of us all, to do her stuff.