

## WHERE IS THE NEXT FOREST?

By Joyce Koch

### New Jersey Woodland Stewards - Class 2010

Scientists point to forest destruction as one of the leading causes of climate change and species extinction. Meanwhile, economic progress is providing us with housing and development on a scale necessary to accommodate a growing population and to fulfill the American Dream of home ownership.

A surprising 80% of U.S. households have a private lawn which totals up to a conservative estimate of 31 million acres of turf grass, an area equal to the New England States or eight New Jerseys. While the average size lawn is 1/3 acre, 5-7 acre zoning is not uncommon in rural areas where homeowners depend on well and septic. Often built on converted farm fields, developers provide new homeowners with cheap and easy turf grass to blanket the few inches of top soil they left behind. However, what comes next is an eternity of watering, fertilizing and mowing to maintain a monoculture which provides for no plant or animal diversity.

Because lawn grasses are of European origin which evolved and thrive at higher latitudes than most U.S. states, they require a bounty of chemical and water treatments to simulate their European homeland. We spend \$25 billion a year coddling this carpet which prefers chilly fog and damp rains rather than hot August skies. We import petrochemicals to provide supplemental nutrients and pesticides to combat insects that would be controlled naturally in a balanced ecosystem. We commit up to 30% of our water resources for lawn irrigation. We have a garage full of edgers, spreaders, aerators, rollers, weed whackers, mowers from reel to rotary to four wheel drive rider models, sprayers, precision seeders, leaf blowers, hoses, sprinklers and other irrigation devices, not to mention grass seed specially designed for sun, shade or both, fertilizers in various formulations, insecticides, herbicides and fungicides.

Many of these large acreage lots would function more efficiently as small woodlands. Converting large lot lawns to woodlots would solve many of the problems of water resource depletion, pollution from runoff, wildlife habitat loss and air quality degradation. Creating natural areas and woodland on a large lot will enhance opportunities for recreation and aesthetics, wildlife and water quality. If the lot connects to other lots, there's ample opportunity to make an even bigger impact by getting neighbors involved. Owners of even just a few acres can make a positive difference in their environment through planning and implementing simple stewardship practices. It can be a great way to get away from the computer and television. It can increase privacy and sanctuary. The homeowner can design for habitat for species they prefer. And lastly, there are the economic benefits of forest products such as firewood, medicinal plants, mushrooms and maple syrup in addition to any timber products. A global benefit is carbon sequestration and cooling. The bonus is escaping the weekly drudgery of mowing and watering.

Following this article is a list of references that will give the large lot owner the ammunition to embark on a program of reforestation. Included is the data to help homeowners interact with neighbors who may disapprove of a less than conventional approach to landscape design. Best management practices

are addressed for silviculture and wildlife management on small lots as well as suggestions for recreation and economic opportunities.

The lawn was the status symbol of late eighteenth century British society- a status symbol transplanted to the New World where it proved even more enduring. A new climate and resource reality requires another transformation of the American landscape back to the celebration of the natural inclination of the Eastern Hardwood Forest.

### References

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*The Woods in Your Backyard; Learning to Create and Enhance Natural Areas Around Your Home* by Jonathan Kays et al. 2006, Natural Resource, Agriculture and Engineering Service Cooperative Extension. NRAES-184.