

Lawn Care and Stoicism

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HALLOWEEN

In many parts of North America, Halloween marks the peak of autumnal splendor. The leaves have turned to glorious golds, vibrant reds, and transitional oranges. Some or most leaves have made their trip from branch to ground. This oh so very familiar pattern, season after season, is comforting. It reassures us that nature's cycle of birth, maturation, decline, decay, and renewal continues unabated, despite the terrors of global, anthropogenic climate change. Despite loss of biodiversity and habitat. Despite droughts, floods, and rising sea levels. Despite intensified hurricanes. Embracing and affirming the seasonal rhythms of nature is part of what Stoics have in mind when they define the goal (telos) as 'living in agreement with nature.'

Some Stoics own homes with one or more yards. While watching the red, gold, and orange leaves accumulate in parks and public greenbelts is pleasant, some homeowners see the blanket of fallen leaves in their yard as an unwelcome chore. The habit of many Americans with grassy yards is to use leaf-blowers and rakes to collect those leaves, stuff them into disposable paper yard waste bags (or sturdy plastic yard waste bins) and set them at the curb for their city's services to collect or empty. For many Americans, leaves transform from arboreal ornaments to litter the instant they land on grass. And all such litter—trash—must be removed and discarded to keep the grassy sward tidy and pretty. But is this ubiquitous practice in agreement with nature, or is it a stubborn habit contrary to nature?

I argue that the ecologically informed answer is that raking up, bagging, and disposing of leaves is contrary to nature. Many environmental experts say raking leaves and removing them from your property is not only bad for your lawn but for the environment as a well. Fallen leaves act as an additional physical layer of organic materials above ground. They provide food, shelter, and nesting or bedding materials to a variety of wildlife, including insects, wood toads, and birds. Fallen leaves provide overwintering protection for many insects, all of which work together to contribute to a healthy yard. The soil itself is also a beneficiary of this autumnal gift of fallen leaves, as the leaves are essentially composted over time into nutrients that feed the next year's crop of grass. But they also feed a vast number of microbes in the soil. Microbes are the most important crop you can grow, considering that all plant life in your yard depends on healthy soil biology.

Many lawn experts advise using a mower to chop the leaves up. Mulched leaves, they contend, accelerate the biological process of nourishing your soil and grass. Mower-mulching cuts down weeds and, unlike leaves that are not chopped up, allows sunlight to get to your grass. Advocates of mower-mulching note that it also reduces greenhouse gases and limits waste. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), 8.7 million tons of yard trimmings, which include leaves, went to landfills in 2017, accounting for just over 6 percent of all waste in landfills. In the

U.S., a heaping 33 million tons of yard debris is disposed of every year, totaling more than 13% of the nation's solid waste. Bags of leaves not only take up space in landfills, but they also combine with other decomposing organic waste to emit methane, a potent greenhouse gas which worsens climate change.

So, the argument for lawn mower mulching of leaves is this:

1. Leaves are natural fertilizer.
2. Mower-mulching leaves nourishes your grass, cuts down weeds, nourishes the soil, and provides habitat and food for insects and other wildlife.
3. Therefore, mower-mulching leaves benefits nature.

Another bad idea is raking your leaves into the street for city services to pick up. Leaves left in the street can clog storm drains and make their way into local streams and waterways, increasing nutrients and promoting algae blooms and dead zones. Mulch-mower advocates say that if you must rake your leaves, you should compost them.

If leaves pile up deeply over more than half of your yard, however, some yard experts say that these thick, un-mulched leaves smother your lawn and block sunshine from getting to the grass. Piles of dead leaves, they say, will attract mold and will leave brown spots in your perfectly homogenous, green, grassy lawn.

But there is a problem with mower-mulching fallen leaves. The problem is the lawn mowers. Gas-powered mowers contribute 5% of the total amount of air pollution in the U.S., according to the EPA. The EPA reports that a single gas-powered lawn mower emits as much pollution in one hour as driving a car for 45 miles. One hour of mowing is the equivalent of driving 350 miles in terms of releasing volatile organic compounds. One gas mower spews 87 lbs. of the greenhouse gas CO₂, and 54 lbs. of other pollutants into the air every year. Moreover, it is estimated that 17 million gallons of gasoline are spilled annually while refilling lawn mowers.

Around 9.6 million lawn mowers were shipped in the US in 2021. Those are *new* machines. The total number of gas mowers in use in the U.S. boggles the mind (and I could not find that number in web searches). The market demand for lawn mowers is increasing substantially due to the increasing demand for equipment from residential and commercial users. The United States lawn mower market is the largest globally, accounting for nearly 80% of the North American lawn mower market share. Increasing demand for landscaping services through suburban lawns, golf courses, sports fields, and public parks contributes to the U.S lawn mower market size. Mowers consume 1.2 billion gallons of gasoline annually, about 1% of U.S. motor gasoline consumption. So, mowers guzzle lots of gasoline, produce lots of pollution, worsen climate change, and generate plenty of noise pollution too. Gas-powered lawn mowers are terrible for the environment. Therefore buying, hiring, or using them is contrary to nature from a Stoic perspective.

What about electric powered mowers? They are quieter, don't emit pollution, don't need gas or oil or as much maintenance. But they do require electricity, so they have an energy cost, which

means an environmental cost. (Solar and wind powered electric mowers have yet to be developed.) The deeper problem is with *all* mowers. The purpose of lawn mowers is to keep a lawn of exactly one species of grass tidy and uniform, that is, *beautiful*.

But the beauty of a monoculture yard is very much in the eye of the beholder. Maintaining grass lawns increases greenhouse gasses, pollutes ecosystems, wastes water, and diminishes biodiversity. Grass lawns are expensive, unsustainable, and poor investments. While more environmentally friendly than pavement, grass lawns and their upkeep come with heavy carbon costs. A monoculture of turfgrass infused with non-native ornamentals excludes native plants and provides little to no habitat for most wildlife. Think about the vast amount of land devoted to turf, both for growing the sod and the amount of sod that occurs on the landscape as urban and suburban lawns. Rainwater runoff from lawns can carry pesticides and fertilizers into rivers, lakes, streams, and oceans via the sewer system. This can poison fish and other aquatic animals and harm humans who swim, surf, and eat seafood that may be contaminated. Manicured turf grass lawns cover up to 50 million acres of land in America. But a new, no-mow movement is challenging this conformity.

So, I argue that maintaining monoculture grass turf lawns is contrary to nature. A Stoic yard owner can (and should) investigate alternatives that need less water, make the best use of a variety of plant species native to her region, and require no mowing at all. Polyculture is beautiful in the eyes of a Stoic. Don't be afraid to let—and help—biodiversity flourish outside your window. Don't let America's addiction to grass turf lawns haunt your yard.

Happy Halloween, my fellow Stoics!