

## Your Green Lawn Is Dead

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor  
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### Cities take the lead with healthier integrated pest management



The Green Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s transformed agriculture worldwide, yielding enormous quantities of produce, particularly cereals. The father of the Green Revolution, agronomist Norman Borlaug, won the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for his work and is credited for saving a billion people from starvation.

In addition to new approaches to farming, irrigation, and the introduction of high-yield crops, the Green Revolution emphasized a heavy reliance on synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides.

We now employ pesticides and herbicides not only for our food sources but also to achieve the “proper” aesthetics of our landscapes, yards, and green spaces. We tend to regard a pristine lawn, free of weeds and thriving insects, as a thing of beauty grown from healthy soil, whereas a natural landscape of native plants -- an ecosystem of self-sustaining plant and insect life -- is unkempt and messy.

It’s estimated that the U.S. uses over a billion pounds of pesticides annually for agriculture and residential use. And just as the Green Revolution taught us that chemicals can alleviate world hunger, there’s now scientific evidence that the overuse of chemicals is associated with environmental and health risks. Beyond minor skin and eye irritations, overexposure to

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pesticides can affect the nervous and reproductive systems, and is reportedly linked to various forms of cancer. Pesticide and fertilizer runoff have also been named as contributing factors to Florida's toxic algae blooms. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends limiting children's exposure to pesticides and exploring safer alternatives.

The environmental impacts of pesticide use are profound. On November 27, the *New York Times Magazine* published the article "The Insect Apocalypse Is Here," which found dramatic declines in insect populations worldwide. Over the past 20 years, the monarch butterfly and rusty-patched bumblebee populations have declined, respectively, 90 percent and 87 percent. Even the lowly earthworm is threatened. Other lesser-known species have disappeared. This dramatic loss of biodiversity buckles the broader ecosystem.

Concerns like these led North Miami resident Laura Hill to begin an advocacy campaign to wean the city off pesticides. On a daily stroll with her children in 2016, Hill says, she saw city workers in hazmat suits spraying a pocket park her kids frequented. Her concerns spiked when a torrential downpour a short time later likely washed much those very same chemicals into city storm sewers, where they eventually would have flowed into Biscayne Bay.

Hill began to research what pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals the city was using, and discovered that some had already been banned in California. Later that year she began an advocacy campaign, calling for the city to adopt integrated pest management (IPM), a strategy that emphasizes natural, non-toxic mechanisms and interventions for pest and weed control. These include replacing non-native plants with native species that have a natural resistance to pests.

Early success came in January 2017, when the North Miami City Council approved an integrated pest management approach for city green spaces, coupled with a gradual reduction of synthetic chemicals.

Not content with a single municipal victory, Hill has set a higher regional goal of creating a "Green Corridor of Northeast Dade," which she hopes will stretch from Aventura south through North Miami, Biscayne Park, Miami Shores, and El Portal.

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In Miami Shores, Hill found an ally in Bound by Beauty's Mary Benton. Discovering similar pest and weed control practices in Miami Shores, Benton and a group of volunteers gathered hundreds of signatures during the Village's Green Day street festival in November 2018 for the Village to become pesticide-free. Their effort resulted in a December 4 Village Council discussion on integrated pest management practices for Village public spaces. With approximately 35 vocal supporters attending, council members unanimously supported the crafting of implementing legislation.

Councilman Jonathan Meltz, who 'fessed up to being a Roundup guy, praised residents for getting out in front of the issue and educating the council.

The Village will most likely move toward implementing integrated pest and weed management practices on an incremental basis. The Miami Shores Country Club golf course, being privately leased, will not be immediately affected.

It's the implementation of these organic landscaping practices that will determine the effort's ultimate success or failure. The new practices may have an aesthetic impact on Village greenery, a concern voiced by some Village staff, and how the broader community responds toward this change will carry weight.

So perhaps what's ultimately most needed is a paradigm shift in how we define natural beauty.

Modern lawns and green spaces are out of sync with the environment's natural state. In fact, North Miami's Sam Van Leer of the Urban Paradise Guild views the typical lawn as a dead landscape -- not a vibrant, living habitat.

So why do we consider them beautiful?

Miami Shores prides itself on a generic perspective of curbside appeal. A home with the neatly manicured carpet of grass à la *Stepford Wives* is an easier sell than something that is more lush and...well...messier.

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But if we can accept the beauty found in what is wild and naturally occurring, then the task of accepting organic landscaping will become easier.

There's also the possibility that the transition to greener growing processes will produce no visible effects, and that it could even improve the Village aesthetic. Kim Konte, the founder of Non Toxic Neighborhoods and former community services commissioner in Irvine, California, states that the aesthetics of Irvine's green spaces actually improved after adopting organic pest-control practices.

Grass became more deeply rooted, more resilient to invasive weeds, and demonstrated improved water retention. Weeds are controlled with close cutting techniques.

These kinds of practices, though, are just the low-hanging fruit for municipal change. The green footprint of every resident's front and back yards dwarfs green spaces in the public domain.

Yet if local governments set the example for the rest of the community, hopefully one by one, we residents will follow suit. Benton envisions blocks in Miami Shores where yards are linked with native pollinator plants.

The *BT's* distinguished horticultural columnist, Jeff Shimonski, offers his own endorsement of IPM: "At Parrot Jungle and Jungle Island, I developed over the years a program that allowed us to stop using pesticides and fungicides. We were able to become members of the EPA's GreenScapes Landscape program and Gold members of the EPA's Pesticide Environmental Stewardship Program."

Integrated pest management works, says Shimonski, saves money, and is good for the environment.

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