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### **Xeriscape the Drudgery of Lawn Care**

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It's waiting there in the back shed for me even now, crouched and ready to spring. Soon it will devour my summer, burning up endless hours growling across the lawn, gulping fuel and spewing exhaust fumes.

Filthy habit, really. The U.S. Environmental Protection Administration estimates that one lawn mowing results in as much air pollution as driving a new car 569 kilometres.

The 50 million lawn mower owners in the U.S. spill about 76 million litres of fuel a year just trying to gas up.

The conventional view on this is that it's inevitable. Grass grows and it demands trimming. Even at this early date, the incessant buzz of lawn mowers can be heard throughout the neighbourhood, as the lawn-care fanatics get an early start.

Increasingly, I find myself longing for someone or something to free me from the tyranny of bluegrass; the mowing, the watering, the endless war with the weeds.

The whole tedious process has an effect similar to snow shovelling -- the longer you do it, the less you like it.

The answer has long been obvious but somehow elusive, like an addiction that refuses to be acknowledged.

The solution is to get rid of the lawn. Tear it out, one chunk of turf at a time and replace it with native plants that need neither pesticides nor copious quantities of water.

The idea, called xeriscaping, is beginning to catch on, and is bound to become more popular in response to the dual trends of pesticide restrictions and increasing water shortages.

A new book called *How To Get Your Lawn Off Grass*, by Carole Rubin, bills itself as "a North American guide to turning off the water tap and going native."

Not that we should need much prompting here on the Prairies. The dustbowl conditions that enveloped much of Saskatchewan and Alberta on Monday have to make you wonder about our priorities when you think about a 25 foot by 40 foot lawn drinking 10,000 gallons of water in a single summer.

Still, the notion of going lawnless is a very tough sell in North America, where many people have an almost visceral attachment to their patch of green.

"I think as water restrictions become a reality, more people will make their minds up," Rubin said Monday from her home in Sechelt, B.C.

"But until that happens, there are going to be people who absolutely refuse; people will use water on their lawns before they will have a shower if there are water restrictions."

In response, some jurisdictions are moving to incentives to convince people to change. In Nevada, the state government will give homeowners \$1,000 to convert their lawn from grass to native grasses and plants as a conservation incentive.

At some point, though, the whole idea of maintaining an artificial patch of green in front of every house is going to become unsustainable. For one thing, the Supreme Court has given municipalities the option of banning the cosmetic use of pesticides on lawns, a move already made in Halifax and under consideration in many more.

You can still manage a lawn without pesticides of course, but it's a lot more trouble. The xeriscape approach eliminates all these concerns. After getting a variety of native plants and grasses established, you can simply let nature take its course and never water it again.

Rubin's book takes the reader through the entire process of converting a lawn to a natural garden, from how to remove turf to plant selection and placement. There's a lot to learn but if you take it on a step-by-step basis, both the workload and the budget can be manageable.

For the prairie region, Rubin identifies some 20 different native grasses, flowers and trees that can turn your water-sucking lawn into a dryland oasis.

For grasses, there is blue grama, buffalo grass and little bluestem. Flowers include dotted gayfeather, Missouri evening primrose, and aromatic aster. Rubin's list of taller plants includes big bluestem, purple coneflower and blue sage, among others.

One of the downsides to this emerging trend is that the seeds are not readily available. In Saskatchewan, Rubin identifies only two seed dealers who carry these kinds of plants. Rubin suggests telling your local nursery what you want. When they see there is a demand, they'll make the effort to stock more native species.

There are some tricks, naturally. Rubin advises mapping out your yard very carefully beforehand to match shade and moisture conditions to the needs of individual plants.

Secondly, start small. Don't try to tear up the whole lawn in one mass conversion project. It's too much work. Choose one small section and build from there.

When your conversion is complete, you will seldom be mowing grass.

You'll be able to drop that mower like a bad habit, and leave it with all its nasty characteristics to moulder in the shed.