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My Favorite Lawn Story

Back in the 1960s, there was a mass exodus underway of urbanites moving to new housing developments in the suburbs, in our case to the outskirts of greater Boston. As I recall, lawn care was a favorite topic of discussion for the new owners, some of whom were probably growing grass for the first time. Unfortunately, the lawns of those inexpensive homes were typically seeded on a few inches of loam spread thinly over gravel. Consequently, growing good turf was a challenge. I gather that the usual solution was frequent mowing and watering plus copious applications of pesticides and nitrates. My wife and I, on the other hand, had the good fortune to acquire an old farm with excellent soil that never needed watering. Our flock of Toulouse geese generally took care of mowing the lush, weed-free lawn. Of course you had to watch where you stepped, especially our children running barefoot, but we soon learned to wipe our feet or clean our shoes before entering the house.

Now switch forty years ahead and thirty miles north. All the homes in the neighborhood where Mary and I now live were built during the housing boom of the 1950s, replete with the usual thin topsoil. Yet many of our neighbors have lush green lawns with few weeds. You probably guessed it. Most of them hire a professional lawn service to periodically spread various chemicals over it, some of which I gather must be toxic, judging from those little yellow warning flags. Our lot has the added feature of being on a hilltop with much solid ledge just beneath the surface. Consequently, grass does not thrive, and our lawn is mostly what some homeowners would call weeds.

One time when Mary asked me what could be done to improve the situation, I told her to look out the window. We are bird lovers, and our dining room window looks directly out onto our wild lawn, which serves as a choice feeding ground for juncos, flickers, sparrows, robins, redpolls, and many other kinds, as they hop and peck merrily about. Then I told her to look at our neighbor's lush green lawn. Alas, not a single bird. Case closed!