



Lawn enforcement: How municipal policies and neighborhood norms influence homeowner residential landscape management



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Along the urban gradient, cities had lawn irrigation and weed/grass height ordinances.
- Suburban homeowners showed high awareness of municipal lawn ordinances.
- 88% of homeowners mentioned a social norm surrounding lawn maintenance.
- Lawn ordinance enforcement generally relied on complaints from neighbors.
- Ordinances, norms, and awareness linkages can impact new water and plant management.

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ABSTRACT

As urban areas expand in population and geographic spread, residential landscapes become more pervasive, which is often associated with an increase in turfgrass that can contribute to changes in water use and nutrient flows. Management of these landscapes is influenced at multiple scales—municipal policies, individual homeowner decision-making, and neighborhood norms, and municipal policies. Most municipalities implement policies that encourage (i.e., weed and grass height ordinances) and restrict (i.e., irrigation ordinances) lawn management. But what is the relationship between yard ordinances, homeowner awareness of these ordinances, and neighborhood yard norms? We explored this question through homeowner interviews and a review of yard ordinances in 17 cities in the Minneapolis–St. Paul Metropolitan Area as well as interviews with code enforcement officers. We found most municipalities have lawn irrigation restrictions and weed or grass height ordinances, yet generally rely on complaints from neighbors to enforce these lawn management policies. This may be helpful when it comes to policies reinforcing agreed upon social norms—like grass height ordinances—but may be difficult with policies acting against the norm—like lawn irrigation restrictions. Additionally, homeowners in suburban areas posted high rates of awareness of local policies. Homeowner comments suggest social norms regarding lawn management are present across the urban gradient; weed-free and mowed lawns were most commonly identified. These findings have implications for policy development moving forward as cities face issues related to water scarcity or try to accommodate changing resident desires for natural landscaping.

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1. Introduction

As urban environments grow in population and geographical area (United States Census Bureau, 2013), understanding the social and political factors that shape residential landscapes becomes increasingly important. Residential landscapes are an integral part of urban ecosystems, accounting for nearly 41% of all urban land (Nowak et al., 1996). Though urban areas include densely

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populated core cities, most growth throughout the twentieth century occurred in suburban areas, home to half of the United States population in 2000 (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). As cities expand outward to suburbs and exurbs, residential land cover—especially lawns—is expanding as well.

Dominating vegetation in residential yards, turfgrass is the United States' largest irrigated crop (Milesi et al., 2005). While some studies suggest urban ecosystems may become more similar to each other than their surrounding rural landscapes (Groffman et al., 2014; McKinney, 2006), others point out an alternative scenario in which lawn care behaviors, specifically fertilizing and irrigating, across the urban gradient may be “more differentiated in practice than in theory” (Polisky et al., 2014).

Roy Chowdhury et al. (2011) argue that as urban environments develop, they are shaped by a variety of socioeconomic, political, and ecological factors across multiple scales, including individual/household decisions, neighborhood-level informal norms, and more formal rules and policies, all of which may play major roles in shaping residential landscapes. These three scales cover both formal (e.g., legally enforceable) and informal (e.g., socially sanctioned) institutions. For instance, formal institutions shape landscapes when local, regional, and state governments enact growth management policies (e.g., urban growth boundaries or development impact fees) to contain the spread of urban land cover (Bengston, Fletcher, & Nelson, 2004). While urban containment policies tend to focus on the regional scale, municipal policies exemplify a formal institution influencing residential landscape management at the household level.

The interaction between these formal policies and informal norms about neighborhood lawn care normative expectations is complex (Larson & Brumand, 2014). Grass height ordinances may formalize social norms around residential landscape aesthetics by promoting ideal lawns, as documented in the American suburbs (Jenkins, 1994; Steinberg, 2006). Other ordinances, such as irrigation restrictions and fertilizer bans, may present a barrier to traditional yard management by limiting actions homeowners can take in pursuit of lawn perfection. Larson and Brumand (2014) report that although weed ordinances and bans on wasteful water use exist in Phoenix, Arizona, residents do not actively consider these rules in their landscape management, in part because they are seldom enforced.

The extent to which landscaping rules—both formal and informal—interact across the urban landscape is uncertain. Little empirical research has explored these institutional dynamics. These institutions certainly interact across scales, from household-level decision-making to neighborhood normative expectations and municipal governance. Individually or collectively, formal rules (e.g., ordinances), associated informal rules (e.g., norms), and household decisions could have broader regional implications on the aesthetics and ecological composition of residential landscapes in expanding urban, suburban, and exurban areas. Yet research is needed to examine policies that regulate landscaping practices, and the degree to which they are invoked and enforced in residents' landscape management.

In this paper, we examine grass height and lawn irrigation ordinances using municipal document review of seventeen municipalities, as well as homeowner and public official interviews, in the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area of the Midwestern United States. We particularly explore how formal municipal policies regarding lawn maintenance and irrigation interact with informal neighborhood lawn-care norms and individual decision-making. The questions posed are: how do municipal policies influence residential landscape management, and how do policies interrelate to neighborhood normative expectations and individual decision-making?

2. Literature review

The prevalence of the lawns in urban and suburban areas may be driven—at least in part—by normative behaviors and tradition. The desire for lawns in the United States dates back to the late 1700s, when wealthy landowners attempted to recreate the well-manicured turfgrass gardens of England and France on the American frontier (Jenkins, 1994; Steinberg, 2006). With the expansion of urban areas and the increase of detached single-family homes in “streetcar suburbs,” lawns gained some popularity among middle-class Americans in the 1870s (Bormann, Balmori, & Geballe, 1993; Steinberg, 2006). It was not until the suburban housing boom after World War II, though, that lawns made the transition from desirable to dominant as an American landscape feature (Jenkins, 1994; Steinberg, 2006).

Lawn management practices in the United States (e.g., mowing, weeding, fertilizing, etc.) are promulgated by a variety of factors. At the residential parcel scale, homeowners' lawn preferences and management decisions are influenced by aesthetic, recreational, environmental, and low-maintenance considerations among others (Larson et al., 2015; Larson, Gustafson, & Hirt, 2009; Martini, Nelson, Hobbie, & Baker, 2013). Peer pressure and a desire to “fit in” may, however, be among the most powerful motivators of lawn/yard care management (Blaine, Clayton, Robbins, & Grewal, 2012; Fraser, Bazuin, Band, & Grove, 2013; Steinberg, 2006). In metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona, researchers found social norms played a dominant role—above and beyond formal rules ‘on the books’—in influencing residents' land management decisions; personal expectations for maintaining “neat” yards that were trimmed and well-maintained were especially pervasive (Larson & Brumand, 2014).

Homeowners actively maintain well-manicured lawns not only because it conforms to neighborhood landscaping norms, but also because an attractive lawn is a reflection of good character, work ethic, and caring (Clayton & Brook, 2005; Robbins and Sharp, 2003). Furthermore, in a market economy, homeowners may view the time, money, and effort expended on yard care as an investment. A lush, green lawn may bolster property values while a lawn that fails to conform to neighborhood norms may be perceived as a financial or social liability (Blaine et al., 2012; Clayton, 2007; Nassauer, Wang, & Dayrell, 2009).

A social norm can be broadly defined as “a rule that is neither promulgated by an official source, such as a court or a legislature, nor enforced by the threat of legal sanctions, yet is regularly complied with” (Posner, 1997, 365). McAdams (1997) theorizes that norms arise based on people's desire for others' to view them positively. This may explain homeowners' desires to conform to lawn management norms, as residents may be seeking the good opinion and respect of their neighbors.

Indeed, research suggests normative lawn behaviors are often clustered at the neighborhood scale and homeowners' lawn management practices are associated with a greater connection to their community (Robbins, 2007). The appeal of social inclusion and belonging is strong enough that homeowners may at times be willing to overlook their own landscaping preferences, environmental concerns, or health in favor of conformity, particularly when it comes to more intensive lawn management norms, like chemical fertilizer application (Fraser, Bazuin, & Hornberger, 2015). Yet, lawn management norms are not simply tied to maintaining a consistent neighborhood aesthetic, or even a neighborhood culture; they are more broadly an expression of affluence, socio-economic status, and group identity (Robbins, 2007).

The interaction of norms and laws is complex and depends largely on the strength of the norm and the type of behavior being regulated. Laws can mandate that citizens behave in a manner either consistent or inconsistent with social norms (McAdams,

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