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Lawn Nation

An Innovative New Exhibit About America's Love Affair With Turf

Cliff Terry

On recent late spring days in Chicago, people casually strolling by the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, a short distance from Lake Michigan in the city's Lincoln Park neighborhood, may have been startled when they spotted more than 80 pink plastic flamingos on the lawn.

For the museum folks, the birds - which have long been identified, of course, as America's premier kitschy lawn ornaments - represent not only feathery fun, but serve as an introduction to "Lawn Nation: Art & Science of the American Lawn," which runs through Sept. 7. The unusual, highly imaginative indoor/outdoor exhibition looks at the cultural underpinnings and environmental consequences of turf grass, the country's largest irrigated crop.

"Lawn is the most common landscape people encounter when they step outside," says Jill Riddell, the museum's vice president of exhibits and strategic initiatives. "No other ground cover in Chicago is as ubiquitous as mowed turf. This exhibition takes a close look at what this landscape of lawn really is, and why we have so much of it. Turf grass is a choice, not an inevitability. People who are lucky enough to have a yard have to wrestle with questions of how to make it look good and easy to maintain, and how to use less water and fewer pesticides."

Created by over 30 artists, designers, filmmakers, scientists and landscape architects, the presentation includes a 1886 tricycle/lawnmower from Argentina, an exhibit of "The History of the Lawnmower" and the films "A Very Brief History of the American Lawn" and "Gimme Green," a wry look at U.S. neighborhood lawn competitiveness and Americans' obsession with their lawns. (For starters, we spend almost \$40 billion a year on our yards, and apply more than 30,000 tons of pesticides.)

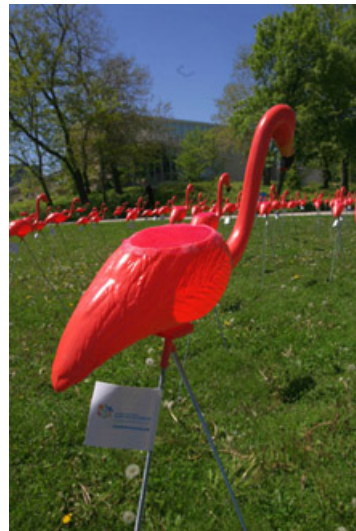
Exhibit visitors also learn numerous fun facts. The U.S. Lawn Mower Racing Association, for example, holds more than 150 annual races in over 20 states. And, an estimated 20 million of the original lawn flamingos—designed by (trivia alert here) Don Featherstone—have been sold since 1957.

In addition, "Lawn Nation" trots out a plethora of "green" entertainment for children, including interactive and physical games (a "re-imagined" mini-croquet court and ring toss), and hands-on computer games for adults such as "The Lawn Conundrum," which allows players to make choices about virtual lawns, such as how much to fertilize and when to mow (one option: "start raising sheep"); "Whose Lawn Is it?" (where you match a photo of a person with her or his lawn); and "How Do You Feel About Your Lawn? Love It? Hate It?" in which participants leave their video statements for other visitors to see. (One lawn-owner responded, "I love it because it's not concrete," while another noted, "I love it because you never know what's going to come up.")

And there's more: "Gnome Grown," features an indoor/outdoor scavenger hunt with garden gnomes, each representing a message about sustainable lawn care; "Instant Grassification 2.0," explores why there are lawns in some places and not others, with photos of school children traveling the city with small mats of sod; and even bookmarks offering tips. ("Try natural pesticides and herbicides. Vinegar or boiling water can be used to kill weeds.")

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For "Lawn Nation," the Nature Museum is partnering with Openlands, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and enhancing public open space in northeastern Illinois, and the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Chicago's Columbia College, which is hosting a sister exhibition, "Beyond Backyards," opening June 20.

For hours and admission prices at the Nature Museum, 2430 N. Cannon Drive, visit www.naturemuseum.org or call 773-755-5100.

LAWN LOWDOWN: Fun Facts about Lawns

- Lawn is the most common landscape we encounter; the U.S. has 60 million lawns, 16,000 golf courses and 700,000 athletic fields.
- If every lawn in the United States were sewn together, it would create a lawn blanket big enough to cover Kentucky.
- Lawn covers three times more acreage than corn, America's largest agricultural crop, making turf grass America's largest irrigated crop.
- Before the introduction of herbicides some 60 years ago, lawns were a mix of grasses, clover and dandelions.
- Lawn care is a \$40 billion industry. Turf grass soaks up 10,000 gallons of water per summer on the average 1,000-foot lawn.
- A gas-powered leaf blower emits as many hydrocarbons in 30 minutes as a car driven cross country at 30 mph—twice.
- While gassing up our mowers and blowers, Americans annually spill 17 million gallons of fuel—6 million gallons more than the Exxon Valdez spilled in Alaska in 1989.
- Plant diversity requires fewer pesticides, less water, no mowing and more wildlife. Native plants also attract a variety of birds, butterflies and other wildlife by providing multiple habitats and food sources.

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