

## CLIMATE COACH

# The surprising benefits of switching to ‘lamb mowers’



Advice by [Michael J. Coren](#)

Climate Advice Columnist

October 24, 2023 at 6:30 a.m. EDT

Sisyphus pushed a boulder for eternity. I had to mow my friend’s lawn.

Every summer, before heading to the beach, we’d have to ensure his grass was cut. We’d push a roaring lawn mower under the scorching Florida sun. The carpet of scratchy St. Augustine grass seemed to grow faster than we could mow it.

If only I had known about the amazing grazing solution pioneered millennia ago. “Lawn mowers” were once synonymous with hooved livestock — goats, sheep, horses and other herbivores — that foraged grasses, seedlings and what are now called weeds. By constantly mowing and fertilizing, they created open pastures and lawns.

A variety of storied lawns have relied on grazing to keep up appearances. Starting in 1863, sheep were a common sight in New York’s Central Park — the “Sheep Meadow” was not a metaphor. Flocks could be found munching on public parks in London, Boston and Chicago. In 1914, more than 100 sheep were invited to the nation’s capital to graze near the Lincoln Memorial, and later the White House grounds. Then they promptly disappeared as machines assumed their role.

After a long hiatus, animals are returning. Europe, ravaged by wildfires, is now paying for fire flocks, herds of sheep to thin vegetation and reduce wildfire risk, resurrecting the silvopastoralism of the past. Sheep are appearing in solar farms, vineyards, cemeteries, golf courses and even atop green roofs. California is enlisting goats as firefighters across the state, while the University of California at Davis relies on sheep to keep its campus in good health.

Suburbia is the next frontier. [Lamb Mowers](#), billed as the country's only sheep-led lawn care service, is munching its way to success. The small business in Northern Virginia employs more than a dozen sheep to mow, weed and fertilize suburban lawns across the region. The modest animals are changing hearts and minds, and perhaps pointing Americans toward a different relationship with their grass.

## The nature of lawns

If grass were a crop, it would be the largest in the United States. Turf grass covers an estimated 1.9 percent of the continental United States, according to a [2005 NASA analysis of satellite images](#), including residential and commercial lawns, golf courses and similar landscapes. Together, these would represent the largest irrigated crop in the United States, three times bigger than corn.

This comes at a steep cost — not least to wildlife displaced by sod. The average homeowner spends about [70 hours a year](#) on lawn and garden care, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey. Maintenance costs are [hundreds of dollars per year](#), according to estimates by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's extension service.

But Cory Suter, the self-described “Chief Shepherd” of Lamb Mowers, discovered another way on his permaculture farm in Northern Virginia. Since 2016, rather than pull out heavy equipment, Suter released his flock of babydoll Southdown sheep to graze on nuisance plants such as poison ivy and multiflora rose. It worked. And he realized a market probably existed in the surrounding suburbs.

So he bought a trailer, loaded up about 15 sheep, and opened for business. People were soon booking regular two-hour, \$195 visits for “weed and feed”: The sheep clip the grass tops and munch weeds, while leaving sheep pellets that dissolve into rich fertilizer in the first rain or watering. For bigger jobs, Lamb Mowers offered a 24-hour “Sheep-over” for \$250, a price he says is competitive with comparable fossil-fuel-powered lawn services.

Sheep are lawn care experts. They are more gentle grazers than goats or horses, clipping grass tops and nibbling weeds homeowners would like removed. They leave about four inches of the blade: just the right height, says [Michigan State University Extension](#), to maximize root growth and shade out weeds. Any lower, as some lawn companies mow, and the grass will grow even faster to reach the sun, necessitating more mowing.

“Sheep love the sweet tips of grass, and biodiverse diets like the weeds in your yard” including bittercress, chickweed and onion grass, says Suter, who grew up farming on a Mennonite homestead in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. “That’s a perfect buffet for our sheep.”

Suter or one of his employees accompanies the animals to uproot hard-to-reach invasives and finish the job with an electric-powered edger for a more manicured look. The sheep don't edge, or do a perfect leveling job across large areas.

“We provide an imperfect mowing service,” Suter admits, but one he says improves the health and biodiversity of the yard.

It also brings other benefits. No chemicals are needed. The sheep selectively eat weeds and invasives (Lamb Mowers won't serve any lawns treated in the last six months). Carbon from the grass is returned to the soil as sheep pellets. One [2006 study](#) found replacing sheep for lawn mowers cut net emissions by more than a third (980 kgCO<sub>2</sub>e/ha/year). If you embrace the [natural lawn](#) and “no mow” movement, the sheep help you make the [transition from sod to meadow](#), and keep it healthy over time.

The biggest benefit, however, may be the joy it brings to the sheep's employers.

## Connecting with sheep

Each spring, Haven Kiers, an assistant professor of landscape architecture at the University of California at Davis, ushers 25 sheep to graze the university's grounds. Between April and June, the animals are unwittingly enrolled in a study documenting how the flock affects everything from soil and biodiversity to students' mental health [as part of the university's Nature Rx program](#) exploring how contact with nature improves human health.

She says a study about sheep's mowing abilities has [evolved into one about well-being](#). “Students ride their bikes by and sit with sheep, or after exams, [the sheep] calm them down and make them happy.” That prompted her to explore how these interactions can once again become part of people's lives, rather than a novelty divorced from modern life.

Kiers, who hopes to turn the Davis flock into a mobile service, says the benefits go beyond sustainability. “You want to do it not because you have to do it,” she says. “You're doing it because it is awesome.”

That's why Beverley and Juan Rivera of Springfield, Va., hire Lamb Mowers back to their leafy suburb each spring and fall. Every year, they invite their neighbors to watch and play as the sheep clear weeds and trim the grass. “It's fun, cute and therapeutic,” says Beverley. “When you have so so much going on in your life, and you have a lawn full of sheep, it's lovely.”

The couple still mows between visits — Beverley says the sheep are not always the most disciplined lawn manicurists — but they're not seeking a perfectly groomed fairway. Since the sheep have arrived, there's no need to apply chemicals or fertilizers on the lawn and children can frolic with them.

If you want to hire Lamb Mowers, or outfits like it, suburban shepherds are in short supply in the United States. Suter says he believes he is one of the few, if not the only one, to offer services to individual homes. His services currently only extend to the D.C., Maryland and Virginia areas. During the spring and fall, his sheep's services are often sold out for weeks. But Suter may franchise the idea for other small homesteaders raising livestock near cities who need extra income, potentially bringing this to new areas of the country.

Suter says what he is doing is nothing new. “We’re trying to practice regenerative agriculture in the suburbs. Instead of fighting with the natural system, we’re working with it,” he says. “This is how everyone used to care for their lawn: horses and sheep. We’re bringing back a very old technology.”