

Grass

There is an old, and probably apocryphal, story that an American tourist visiting Canterbury was admiring the lawns outside the cathedral when he noticed an elderly person, dressed in a workaday horticultural fashion and pushing a wheelbarrow. The American tourist approached him and expressed his admiration for the lawn with some volubility, as is reputedly the habit of that nationality and occupation, and the gardener, for it was he, replied laconically but pleasantly as one might expect from an Anglo Saxon cultivator of the soil. Encouraged by the mainly unintelligible but apparently friendly response the American reiterated his admiration and then asked the gardener how one went about producing such a lush and verdant sward.

The gardener looked thoughtful for a few moments, while the American looked expectant, then he spoke in Kentish drawl, starting with a long drawn out, “Weeill, every bit of it is important, but it all starts at the beginning so to speak, with the ground. It’s important how you prepares the ground, you digs it and you levels it, you fertilises it and you rakes it, and then you rolls it; and when you have got it as good as you can get and you are ready to sow you chooses your seed. Now, this is very important, there are meadow grasses and rye grasses, soft grasses, coarse grasses and fine grasses. Some grasses grow in the shade under trees, others never will, and depending on the sort of soil you have some like chalk and some like clay, it is very important to get the right seed if you want a lawn like this.”

The gardener paused significantly, the tourist waited expectantly.

“Then,” said the gardener “comes the most important part of all. You mows and you mows and you mows, for about four hundred year.”

For those who like to tell stories it makes a nice story, with opportunities for appropriate (or inappropriate) accents. It is true there are many different grasses with differing qualities, and it may be that mowing with a cylinder mower rather than a rotary mower makes a difference. The difference between diligent, frequent mowing and occasional lackadaisical mowing is certainly visible instantly even when both are newly mowed, but my experience is that within ten or fifteen years, regardless of the seed I planted, the grass will have made its own selection of species. The only trace of the grass I planted twenty years ago on my own lawn is where it grows, competing with the violets between the stones of the patio; it was no competition for the bents that have taken over the lawn.

My garden is not the close of Canterbury Cathedral, to me this is as it should be, the grass I now have in my lawn may not be the grass I visualised, but it is the grass most suited to the conditions. A garden is an artificial environment created and maintained by man, but a gardener is like the master of an old fashioned sailing ship, he may decide his desired destination, but some routes and destinations are not possible, and his course and which sails he sets are decided by nature. And occasionally nature will visit disaster on him, but that is another story.