

Grass II

“*All flesh is grass,*” the Good Book tells us. This has literal meaning as we learned in Bio 101: the food chain starts with grass (and other vegetation) at the bottom, which is eaten by herbivores like mice and deer in the middle, which are then eaten by carnivores (coyotes, hawks, humans) at the top. So functioning ecosystems, like the watershed surrounding Keuka Lake, must have grass (and other vegetation) to support a diverse plant and animal community. However, the Good Book does not say that all grass is flesh, nor does it say all grass is good.

Cut to the issue of carving “view lots” out of forestland surrounding Keuka Lake, where acres of trees are replaced by acres of grass to provide homeowners magnificent and unfettered views of Keuka Lake. Although the forests surrounding Keuka Lake are populated by more than 50 species of grasses and sedges (grass-like plants), they are rarely the species of non-native grasses planted to maintain the grassy vistas for homesites above Keuka Lake. More often, non-native exotic grasses are used, and they are mowed regularly, depriving wildlife of much of the nutritional benefit provided by grasses in the woods (seeds and flowers) or cover required to hide the young of wildlife from predators and/or provide the bugs eaten by forest songbirds, grouse, and turkeys. Worse, grasses planted to maintain the views are not nearly as effective in preventing water runoff in storms (their root systems are not as deep or extensive as the trees, shrubs, native grasses and wildflowers they replaced). *Maintaining grassy cover also requires annual expenditures (exposure to the environment), on herbicides and fertilizers that can end up in Keuka Lake.* Building homes on areas barren of trees and their leaves has the additional downside of eliminating the natural cooling of homes in summer. As a final negative, weekly mowing of those acres of grass puts pollutants in the air and adds to the fuel we buy from foreign countries.

So, in the name of ecological consciousness and responsibility, view lots with their acres of opened, grass-replaced forestland should be banned, right? Nope, not even close. There actually is a win-win solution. It’s the grass that’s the problem, not the view lots.

Ask any student of forest ecology what forest stage is in short supply and they’ll tell you it’s “early succession.” This stage is created when the forest is opened by disturbance, such as windstorms and wind shear, ice storms, landslides and natural fire. It’s characterized by a few snags, and a lush, rapidly growing green layer of grass, wildflowers, shrubs, and tree seedlings. This stage lasts 10-20 years, when it is replaced by a layer of young trees (called saplings) in the 10-30 foot height range. Early succession habitat is critically important to wildlife as a source of highly nutritious vegetation, a place for young wildlife such as fawns to hide from predators, and as an additional source of food in the form of an abundant supply of bugs for all kinds of forest birds. Snags (one or two per acre) left standing after disturbance provide homesites for birds, mammals, and amphibians in the form of cavities in standing snags and hollow logs with sloughing bark. The openings don’t have to be large to work – openings of less than one acre are incredibly beneficial.

So, what’s the win-win solution for homeowners who want “view lots?” If you need to cut down the trees to get your view, engage a certified forester who will actually give you some value for the trees that are cut and removed. A few snags will be left for wildlife (they can be strategically left to minimize interference with the view). There will be minimal ground disturbance or compaction, and the shrubs, native grasses, wildflowers and tree seedlings left behind will provide all those wildlife benefits, *and reduce run-off into Keuka Lake.* You’ll have an unobstructed view of the lake. Once the small trees turn into saplings and begin to block your view, cut them down (and leave them on the ground: they’ll rot and recycle nutrients), setting succession back to the shrub-grass-seedling stage and maintaining early succession habitat.

If your view lot is already grassed or was agricultural land? Let it go. Native trees, shrubs, wildflowers and grasses will seed themselves in, creating early succession habitat. When needed (in about 20 years), trim back the saplings that will develop.

Then, instead of spending your weekends mowing the lower forty, put up your feet and enjoy the show – all those songbirds, turkeys, grouse, deer, foxes, and occasional bears. Harvest and eat the blackberries that will grow. And feel good about what you did.