Wildlife

Growth in artificial lawns poses threat to British wildlife, conservationists warn

Growing trend to lay fake lawns instead of real grass causes loss of habitat for wildlife and creates waste that will never biodegrade

Sandra Laville

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Artificial grass companies are reporting an increase in sales. Photograph: Lucy Nicholson/Reuters

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Environmentalists have warned that a growing trend to lay artificial lawns instead of real grass threatens the loss of wildlife and habitat across Britain.

From local authorities who purchase in bulk for use in street scaping, to primary schools for children's play areas and in the gardens of ordinary suburban family homes, the sight of pristine, green artificial grass is becoming a familiar sight. One company has registered a 220% year-on-year increase in trade of the lawns.

But as families, councils and schools take to turfing over their open spaces with a product which is most often made from a mix of plastics - polypropylene, polyurethane and polyethylene - there is growing alarm amongst conservationists and green groups.

They say the easy fix of a fake lawn is threatening the habitat of wildlife, including butterflies, bees and garden birds as well as creating waste which will never biodegrade.



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Mathew Frith, director of conservation at the London Wildlife Trust, said: "You are using fossil fuels to make it, so there is a carbon impact there, you have to remove a significant amount of soil to lay it so you are reducing the direct and indirect porosity of the soil, you are removing habitat which a wide range of species are dependent on and at the end of its life this is a non-biodegradable product which ultimately goes back into landfill. So yes we are concerned at its proliferation."

But the demand for the flawless vibrant green carpet, which needs little or no maintenance and does not need cutting, is growing. Some landscape gardeners are dropping their traditional gardening work in favour of spending 100% of their time excavating soil, laying hardcore and installing fake lawns.

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Paul Wackett, a landscape gardener from Cobham in Surrey, said: "It has gone absolutely crazy this year. Ninety nine percent of it is domestic homes - from small houses up to large houses with big gardens who use it as a feature around their hot tubs.

"Everyone is living in a very busy world now, no one has time to do anything except work. They work hard and they play hard so they are having this laid if they have children or dogs and they want to enjoy the garden but don't have want to maintain it. There is no lawn mowing, no watering."

Companies from small start-ups to longstanding market leaders that began life providing artificial turf for football and hockey pitches are reporting similar demand.

Eamon Sheridan, managing director of Artificial Grass London, said there had been an increase in demand across the board. "We have seen a 63% increase in sales in our case, but we are part of a group of companies, one of which, Artificial Grass Direct, has been established a lot longer, and so far they have seen a 220% increase in sales this year on last year."

Research in 2011 revealed that 3,000 hectares (12 sq miles) of garden vegetation had been lost over eight years in the UK - which amounts to more than two Hyde Parks a year. Much, if not all, of this loss was down to decking, concreting over gardens, and the use of artificial grass, Frith said.

Paul de Zylva, senior nature campaigner for Friends of the Earth, said: "I think the negative impacts of artificial grass are substantial. For the sake of convenience and not wanting the children to get muddy, what is it we are losing here?

"You will find bees burrowing into lawns which are a mix of grass seeds, other insects will be in there too, and worms - which are incredibly important in terms of the ability of the soil to absorb nutrients and keep soil structured, so that when you have heavy rain or drought you have a soil system which can cope. By using artificial grass, you lose all this. You are creating a 'Don't come here sign,' for wildlife."

Even those who have benefited from the boom in fake grass are finding that high demand does not always mean an easy life.



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Robert Redcliffe, managing director of Nam grass, which has been in the UK for six years, said the demand was now so great that his high-quality European-made product was increasingly being undercut by cheaper imports from the far east.

"It is becoming, as everything does, a very, very competitive market; we can use all our unique selling points but at the end of the day it's the price that talks," he said. "Every day there are boatloads of low-quality, cheaper products being shipped over from China. That is our greatest problem at the moment."

And Redcliffe has some sympathy for the environmental case. "I would agree them; it's not for everyone, and it's not for every bit of the garden. Half my garden is artificial grass, where the children's play area is, but the rest is natural lawn with lots of shrubs and plants. I spend all my time trying to make the lawn look as good as the artificial one."

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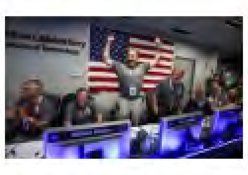
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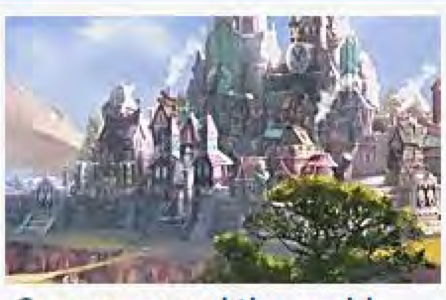
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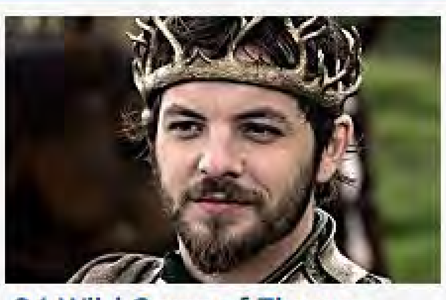
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CathyRozel 1h ago 1

Plastic grass users should be forced to internalise some of the costs they are imposing on human society and the natural world by paying a surcharge eg more council tax (as suggested by someone below).

Currently, they are not paying the costs that plastic grass produces in terms of contributions to greenhouse gas emissions during its fabrication and disposal, nor the ecological costs to wildlife, nor the costs incurred through increasing run off at a time when flooding is already a big issue.

Reply Report

Unfeathered 2h ago 1

I thought about putting this stuff on my balcony to cover the bare metal (which gets remarkably hot when it's sunny), but when you get close up to it it's really ugly and scabby looking. I went with a rug I can take out went it's needed instead.

Reply Report

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