

STAFF REPORT: 08/13/2025 REGULAR MEETING

PREPARED BY: L. SAINT JAMES

APPLICATION NUMBER: HDC2025-00458

ADDRESS: 3290 SHERBOURNE

HISTORIC DISTRICT: SHERWOOD FOREST

APPLICANT: CHRIS MUELLER / NATURAL COMMUNITY SERVICES

PROPERTY OWNER: JEREMY WAGNER-KAISER

DATE OF PROVISIONALLY COMPLETE APPLICATION: 07/16/2025

DATE OF STAFF SITE VISIT: 07/27/2025

SCOPE: ALTER LANDSCAPING IN FRONT AND BACK YARD

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The house at 3290 Sherbourne, built in 1928 for Raymond S. Brown by the George McKnight Building Company, is an example of Tudor Revival architecture. This style is characterized by its steeply pitched gable roofs, prominent brick and stone masonry, decorative half-timbering, and tall, narrow windows with leaded glass. The house also features a prominent central chimney, a round tower with a conical roof, and a mix of brickwork patterns. The architectural details reflect a romanticized interpretation of late medieval English building traditions.

Currently, the front landscaping includes mature shrubs and dense plantings surround the base of the house, particularly near the chimney and entryway, while a few medium-sized trees provide partial shade across the lawn and garden beds.



Staff photo, 07/27/2025
















Staff photo, 07/27/2025

PROPOSAL

- Landscaping updates to front and back yards.
 - **Front yard:** replacement of plants and overgrown vegetation in existing beds adjacent to the house. New planting beds adjacent to the public sidewalk frame the house entry walk and anchor the driveway entrance. Turfgrass lawn in the front and eastern side yards, along with the roadway parking strip, will be replaced with low growing no-mow native lawn species. New ornamental and deciduous shade trees add spatial definition, frame the home's entry, and provide summer shading for the home's south facade.
 - **Back yard:** replacement of existing turfgrass and plantings with new planting beds and a compacted gravel seating area. New ornamental and evergreen trees add spatial definition, privacy, and shade. New shrubs provide additional privacy, bird habitat, and seasonal interest. Runoff from adjacent downspouts is routed to small raingardens and swales to encourage infiltration. Overgrown vegetation on the west side of the garage is removed to create a multi-purpose storage area with new screen plantings.

LEGEND

-  Native No-mow Lawn
-  Native Ornamental Bed
-  Gravel Surfacing
-  Raingarden
-  Drainage Swale
-  Michigan Boulder Outcrop (see notes)
-  Portable Hammock (Existing)
-  Existing Hedge
-  Existing Tree
-  Proposed Deciduous Tree
-  Proposed Evergreen Tree
-  Proposed Shrub
-  Proposed Perennials - 1 Gal.



Path Rush - Juncus tenuis



Ivory Sedge - Carex eburnea



Eastern Star Sedge - Carex radiata



Pennsylvania Sedge - Carex pennsylvanica

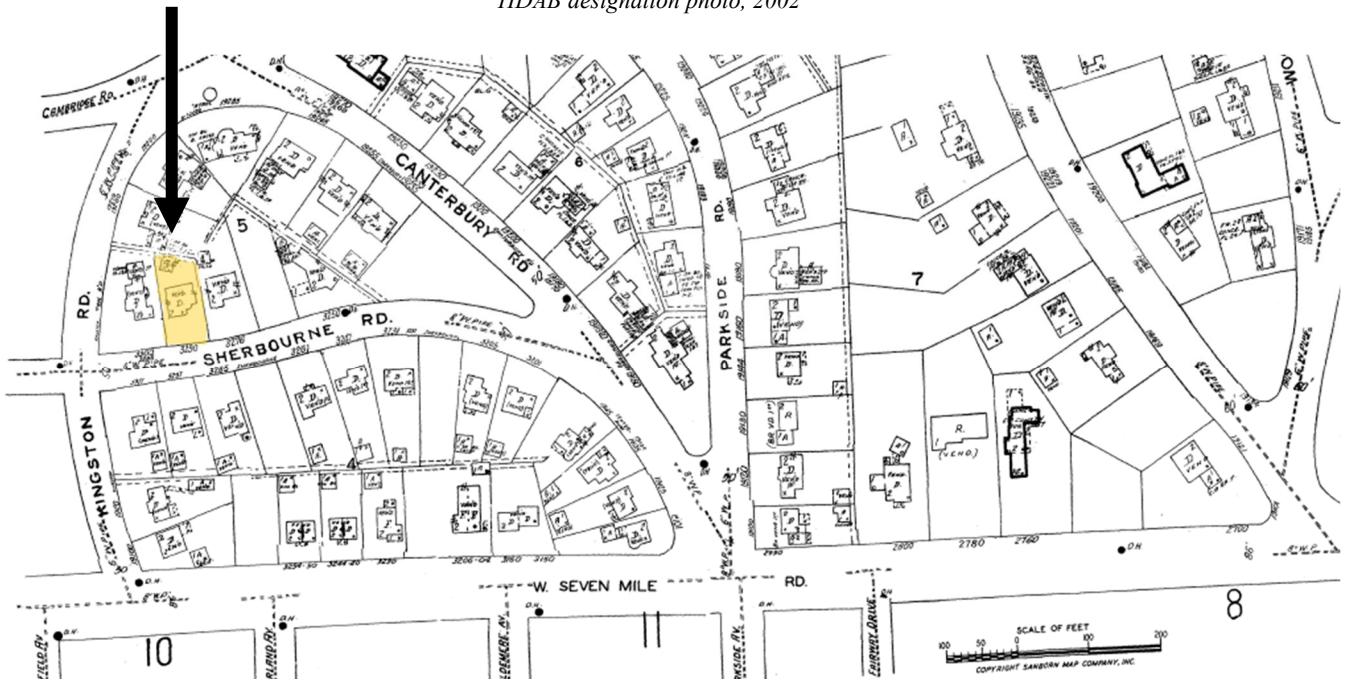
*Photos of species of proposed
"no-mow lawn" from application*

STAFF OBSERVATIONS AND RESEARCH

- The Sherwood Forest Historic District was enacted in 2001.



HDAB designation photo, 2002



*Sanborn Map, Vol. 16
Subject property highlighted in yellow and marked by black arrow.*

- Staff: field observations for the Sherwood Forest Historic District's open spaces are as follows:
 - Winding roads, as opposed to the grid structure of historic districts like Indian Village.
 - Similar front yard treatments as what is proposed (removal of most or all front yard lawn); however, they were done after designation without the approval of the Historic District Commission.

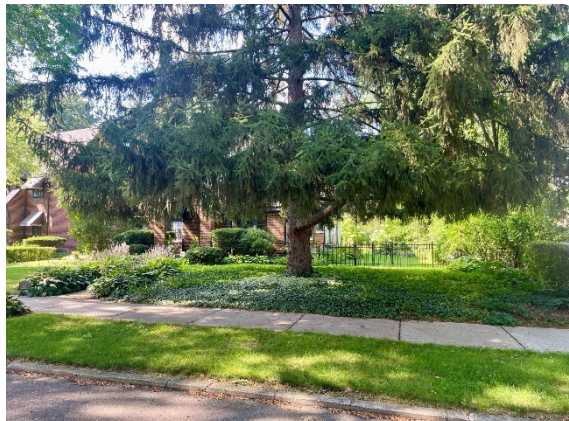
19494 SHREWSBURY



19434 STRATFORD



3400 CAMBRIDGE



Staff photos, 07/27/2025

- Definition of a lawn, as defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary: *ground (as around a house or in a garden or park) that is covered with grass and is kept mowed*

HISTORY OF LAWNS

- **1913 – 1921:** Under President Woodrow Wilson's administration (1913-1921), the federal government started allocating significant resources to developing lawn grass seeds for golf courses.
 - **World War I (1914 – 1918):** put America's lawn-improvement quest on hold as citizens turned yards into early Victory Gardens* and invested resources in war efforts. President Woodrow Wilson delegated White House lawn maintenance to sheep, freeing the grounds crew for military service and raising wool for the Red Cross.

**A "war garden" or "victory garden" was a civilian garden, typically at private residences, but also on public land, cultivated during World War I and World War II to supplement food supplies and boost morale. These gardens, often featuring vegetables, fruits, and herbs, aimed to reduce pressure on the public food supply caused by wartime shortages and transportation challenges.*

- **1922:** First release of *Fruit, Garden and Home* (and eventually renamed as *Better Homes and Gardens* in 1924), which largely focused on flowers/gardens throughout the 1920's



Fruit, Garden and Home issue covers, 1922 – 1924

- **Great Depression (1929 – 1941), specifically 1937:** Government needs to put people to work. One of the positions they started paying people to do was planting lawns in golf courses, athletic fields, and playgrounds, airports, road shoulders, and railway embankments.
- **1938:** The Fair Labor Standards Act made a 40-hour workweek the new U.S. norm. Many Americans devoted newly free weekends to lawn enhancement, maintenance and enjoyment. World War II (1939 – 1945) soon sidelined those efforts, but post-war prosperity would accelerate lawn pursuits.

HDAB FINAL REPORT: SHERWOOD FOREST HISTORIC DISTRICT

Emphasis by staff

- **Pg. 2:** Sherwood Forest, one of Detroit's premier residential subdivisions, is significant for its well-built, substantial housing stock, the majority of which was constructed in the 1920s, 30s and 40s by well-known Detroit architects and builders. It is also significant as a community planning effort.

- **Pg. 3-4:** Stewart and Fry placed a half page ad in the December 16, 1916 issue of the Detroit Free Press entitled A Detroit Needs This Addition. ... The ad refers to Sherwood Forest as an exclusive residential park, mentioning that the land has an elevation of twenty-three feet above Woodward Avenue and *it is made up of hill and dale covered with a magnificent natural forest through which winding drives are laid out.*
- **Pg. 4:** The Sherwood Forest name is most likely derived from the area frequented by the legendary Robin Hood, *reflecting an interest in English history* with street names such as Canterbury, Sherbourne, Cambridge, and Shrewsbury; *the increasing interest in domestic architecture based on British medieval and early renaissance models may also have played a role.*
- **Pg. 5:** Sherwood Forest is a carefully planned residential subdivision. As part of the original plans for the area, all residential streets were paved twenty feet across. All lots, except those fronting Livernois Avenue and Seven Mile Road, were provided with five foot sidewalks and shade trees, sewers, drainage pipes, street lights, telephone lines and water mains.
- **Pg. 5-6:** Although Sherwood Forest was platted in 1916, the first building, 19144 Parkside, was not built until 1922. Construction increased between 1924 and 1930 during which period 142 structures were erected. ... More than half of all the structures in Sherwood Forest were built between the years of 1934 and 1941.
- **Pg. 7:** As a result of thoughtful planning, *the subdivision of winding, oak lined streets has handsome, well-maintained houses surrounded by expansive lawns on landscaped lots.* ... The streets of Sherwood Forest are laid out as curving avenues as opposed to the strict grid pattern found in many neighborhoods. As a result, most of the building lots are irregular in size and shape.
- **Pg. 8:** The residential buildings of Sherwood Forest are predominantly Neo-Tudor, *a style based on English Medieval and early Renaissance architecture.*
- **3270 Cambridge Road, Lloyd G. Grinnell House (C.1927):** In addition to its architecture, the off-center walkway approaching the low porch steps up the graded, *landscaped front lawn contributes to the rustic, naturalistic character of this property.*

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN: SHERWOOD FOREST HISTORIC DISTRICT

Emphasis by staff

- **(13) Relationship of significant landscape features and surface treatments:** *The front lawn area is generally covered with grass turf,* subdivided by a straight or curving concrete, stone, or brick walk leading to the front entrance and a single width side driveway leading to a garage, which is most often located at the rear of the lot but sometimes attached to the rear, side, or, less frequently, the front of the main dwelling. ... Foundation plantings, often of a deciduous nature and characteristic of the period between 1920 and 1960, are present virtually without exception. Large trees of many varieties shield some houses from view. *There is variety in the landscape treatment of individual properties.* ... *The placement of trees on the tree lawn between the concrete public sidewalk and masonry curb varies from block to block or street to street.* Replacement trees should be characteristic of the area and period. If an American elm is planted, it should be disease resistant.

COMPATIBILITY

- Staff notes that while early 20th-century English-inspired developments, such as Sherwood Forest, often included a mix of clover, grasses, and varied groundcovers, reflecting an aesthetic aligned with environmental stewardship, staff found no photographic evidence confirming that front yards were primarily gardens during the district's period of significance. Although a low-mow, native or tapestry lawn may evoke the intended historic character, the designation report describes "expansive lawns," and the Elements of Design state that front lawn areas are "generally covered with grass turf." As such, it would be speculative to assert that gardens predominated in front yards in the early 20th-century.
- That said, it is staff's opinion that more, if not substantially more, of the existing turfgrass could be replaced with a low-growing, no-mow native "lawn" or compatible planting beds without adversely impacting the historic character of the district. To ensure compatibility with the district's visual identity, however, a clearly visible and cohesive area of traditional turfgrass should be retained. This would help preserve the established pattern of expansive lawns and maintain a visual anchor within the landscape.
- Staff concludes that a greater degree of lawn conversion may be appropriate as long as the overall landscape continues to reflect the intended appearance of an expansive, unified front lawn.

ISSUES

- The front lawn, which is proposed to be replaced by "no-mow lawn," is a distinctive, character-defining feature to the historic district at large, as described in the HDAB designation report and the Elements of Design. Although staff might suggest that a greater extent of the existing lawn could be transformed into a mix of planting beds and adding shrubbery, some turf grass lawn should remain prominent.

Recommendation 1 of 2 – Denial – Replace front lawn with "no-mow lawn"

Staff recommends that the proposed work will be inappropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Sherwood Forest Historic District's Elements of Design, specifically:

Standards #:

2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.

9. New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction shall not destroy historic materials that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and shall be compatible with the massing, size, scale, and architectural features to protect the historic integrity of the property and its environment.

Elements of Design #: 13

For the following reasons:

- The front lawn is a distinctive, character-defining feature, as there is no evidence confirming that front yards weren't primarily lawns at the district's period of significance. Removing it in its entirety is inconsistent with the districts protected character.

Recommendation 2 of 2 – Certificate of Appropriateness – Remaining landscaping

Staff recommends that the proposed work will be appropriate according to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and the Sherwood Forest Historic District's Elements of Design.