

a voice
for the natural
landscaping
movement



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NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES



Grow It!

Don't Mow It

by Bret Rappaport

The economic progress that followed our Civil War brought ecological regress in its wake. We plowed up the prairies, chopped down forests, dammed mighty rivers, and eventually carpeted our front, back, and side yards with a lush monoculture of turf grass.

In the dark 1890s, environmental awareness started a slow shift away from turf grass to wildflower gardening with its focus on natural landscapes. In 1981, Darrel Morrison, a professor at the University of Georgia and member of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), defined three characteristics necessary in natural landscape design:

- 1) regional identity (sense of place)
- 2) intricacy and detail (bio-diversity) and
- 3) elements of change.

Not surprisingly, the first professional and amateur landscapers who attempted to realize Morrison's vision ran into public opposition. For several decades, natural landscapers from Florida to Canada faced prosecution for violating local weed laws. These laws, designed to protect the public from neglectful landowners, promoted

monoculture and the accompanying notion that man and Nature are independent of each other. Neighborhoods that opposed the non-conformity of the natural landscape attempted to find valid objections for their claims. They argued that natural landscapes resulted in:

- rats and mice
- mosquitoes and pests
- fire hazards
- air-borne pollens
- lower property values

Each argument is flawed.

Rats and vermin are products of civilization, not nature. They do not live in natural landscapes, eating plants and berries; they live in man-made structures, dining on garbage.

Mosquitoes breed in standing water. Naturalistic landscapes tend to absorb more water than traditional lawns, thus reducing, rather than increasing, run-off and standing water. By providing a habitat for birds, natural landscapes may also increase the population of mosquito predators.

Properly managed naturalistic landscapes do not present any greater fire hazard than any other landscape type. Not only

does prairie grass burn quickly and at a low temperature, but natural landscapes comprise mostly green, leafy material that does not burn readily.

Allergens are primarily produced by exotic grasses, oak trees, and ragweed. Most native yards are insect-pollinated and so cannot produce air borne allergens.

Finally, property values are a function of public perception. As naturalistic landscaping becomes more familiar and gains acceptance, it will be viewed as an asset rather than a liability. Furthermore as suburban sprawl continues to consume open space and natural settings are lost, those rare elements of nature that remain in a landscape will increase its value.

It has been and continues to be a long, tough row to hoe for those who would rather "grow than mow." Confronted with out-dated and ambiguous weed laws, a growing number of environmentally concerned home owners are standing up to their neighbors and municipal officials and reclaiming their right to landscape naturally. And, they are winning.

For those who undertake natural landscaping in their own front and backyards, five simple steps may minimize potential conflicts and avoid "weed wars." They can be remembered by the acronym, BRASH.

BORDERS can provide a sense of order and purpose preferred by most homeowners. A "wild" yard tends to conflict with that preference and can disrupt equilibrium. A simple border – a mowed edge or low stone wall – can keep neighbors mollified, if not happy.

RECOGNIZE the rights of others. You have a right to your coneflowers and bluestems, but your neighbor has a right to his clipped lawn, plastic sunflowers, and concrete lawn deer. Avoid arrogance by remembering that you are trying to win converts, not be a martyr willing to go down in a flood of litigation and neighborhood hostility.

ADVERTISE. Let your neighbors know what you are doing – and why. Tell them about your project before you start,

and continue to provide updates as you progress. You may want to consider putting up a small but readable sign that announces that your property is a special place that saves water, eschews toxic chemicals, and provides sanctuary for wildlife. Wild Ones provides such a sign, as does the National Wildlife Backyard Federation. You may also simply make a sign of your own.

START SMALL Daniel Burnham, an influential architect at the turn of the century, once said, "Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood." The sixth century philosopher Lao Tzu taught: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Both ideas apply to successful natural landscapes. Having an overall plan, but proceeding in small stages, will reduce expenses, increase learning and enjoyment, and engender less hostility from skeptical neighbors.

HUMANIZE. Once we recognize that we are a part of nature, adding spontaneous personal touches to our gardens provides a human element to the natural setting. Strategically placed bird feeders, birdbaths, stone benches, pathways, sundials, and gazer balls create interesting accents. These touches also tell onlookers that the landscape is intended.

Many people create natural landscapes and never face hostile neighbors or uptight town officials. A good example is Wild Ones member Rochelle Whiteman in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. When she converted her yard into a naturalistic prairie landscape, her neighbors asked her to help them do likewise. Today, her neighborhood boasts seven natural landscapes all on the same street.

Although a lush green mask of Kentucky bluegrass covers some 32,000 square miles of suburban and urban America, change is in the air. The natural landscaping "movement" has taken root, and its adherents are a varied lot. They all share a common goal – to harmonize gardening and landscaping practices with nature. ♻️

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS FOUND IN THIS ARTICLE:

Natural Landscaping. The practice of cultivating plants which are native to the bioregion without resorting to artificial methods of planting and care, such as chemical fertilizer, mowing, or watering by other than natural processes. The goal of natural landscaping is to create harmony between the landscape and the larger ecosystem of the immediate and surrounding bioregion.

Exotic. A plant growing outside its natural bioregion.

Weed. A plant generally considered undesirable, unattractive, or troublesome; especially one growing where it is not wanted, as in a garden.

Weed Law. Any federal, state, county, or local statute, regulation, or ordinance that limits the type or size of vegetation cultivated on land within its jurisdiction.

Bret Rappaport is the past president of Wild Ones and serves on the national board of directors. Bret is a member of the Lake to Prairie (IL) Chapter.

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