

Being Neighborly

How to Naturally Landscape without Aggravating Neighbors And Village Officials

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"I want us as a culture to depart from the old tradition of evaluating land according to what can be extracted as a commodity or abstracted from it as a social asset and turn instead to a new tradition of valuing land for the life it harbors."—Sara Stein

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 details (biodiversity)
- 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
- airborne pollens
- lower property values

Each argument is flawed.

Rats and vermin are products of civilization. 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, runoff 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 plants are insect-pollinated and do not produce airborne 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 homeowners are standing up to their neighbors and municipal officials and reclaiming their right to landscape naturally. And, they are winning.

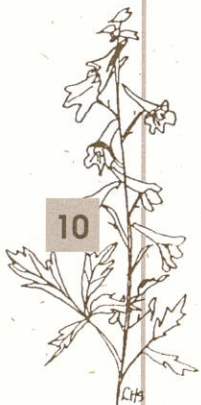
For those who undertake natural landscaping in their own front and backyards, five simple steps may minimize potential conflicts and avoid "weed wars." They can be remembered by the acronym BRASH.

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, Wis. 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. 🌱

"Coexistence is part of the very foundation of Nature."
—Robert Masello

Important Causes of Hayfever

People often wonder if native landscaping contributes to allergies. You'll see from the list below that the real culprits are rather a select group of trees, non-native grasses, and 'weeds' (plants no one would choose to add to their landscape).

This information was collected from *That the Patient May Know* by Harry F. Dowling, M.D. and Tom Jones, M.D. and *The International Textbook of Allergy* edited by J.M. Jamar, M.D. Annotations by Lorrie Otto.

TREES

Birches (*Betula*)
Hickories (*Carya*)
Ashes (*Fraxinus*)
Walnuts (*Juglans*)
Oaks (*Quercus*)

[Although many trees are important sources of allergenic pollens, no one would suggest that woods be destroyed for that reason.]

GRASSES

Redtop Grass (*Agrostis alba*)
Bermuda Grass (*Cynodon dactylon*)
Orchard Grass (*Dactylis glomerata*)
Timothy (*Phleum pratense*)

Kentucky Blue Grass (*Poa pratense*)

[None of the grasses above is native to the U.S.]

Many grasses bloom in May and June when

ground-nesting birds need cover. To mow at that time destroys both cover and nests. Ironically, though it is against the law to shoot songbirds, it is not illegal to destroy their nests.

Mowing grasses from mid-July to frost is counter-productive for the following reasons:

1. Many grasses are in seed at this time. Thus mowing does nothing to remove pollen.
2. Mowing eliminates a good filter that removes dust and other particulates which are health hazards that pose problems for the entire population.
3. Cutting removes good food and cover for wildlife. (This does not include rats, which do not gather grass seeds, but depend on grain cribs, garbage, and pet food. Rats are not native to the U.S. They arrived in America with settlers and are dependent on people.)
4. Mowing maintains the landscape at weed level. Annual weeds germinate and thrive in disturbed soil.
5. Frequent mowing retards the growth of perennial native flowers and prevents their seeding.

HERBACEOUS PLANTS

Pigweeds (*Amaranthus*)
Ragweeds (*Ambrosia*)
Goosefoot (*Chenopodium*)

