



Rewilding Cabin John

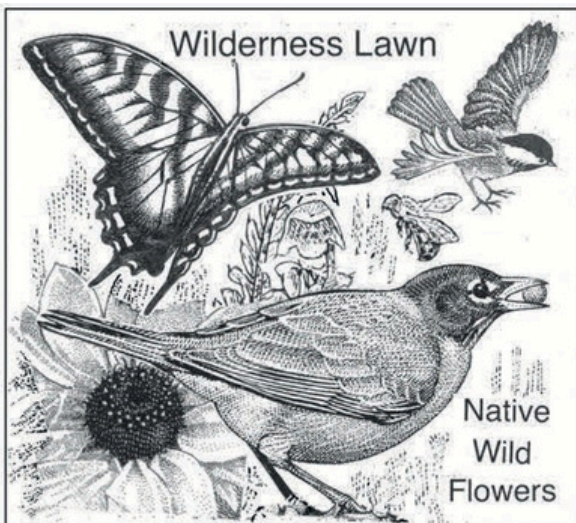
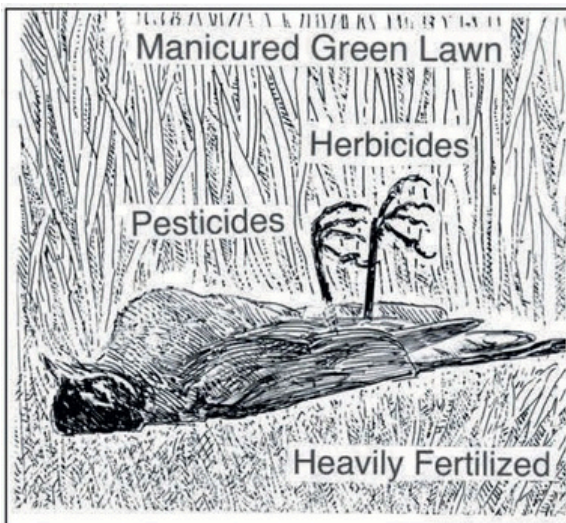
By Eric Dinerstein

The tranquility of a late August day evaporated with the whine of a landscaping crew’s gasoline-powered lawn mower. The noise drowned out the songs of the Carolina wrens in the yard, one of our loudest singers. A month later, the same landscaping team had shifted to leaf-blowing the few sycamore and black walnut leaves that had fallen on a cool morning. Shutting the windows and even putting on headphones failed to block out the noise. When the landscapers finally stopped their racket, I felt my sanity creep back. What have we become? Across Cabin John, we are surrounded by an unwelcome ensemble of noisy machinery dedicated to propagating one of the worst inventions of modern suburbia—large lawns of grass.

If you polled residents for the reasons they moved from an urban environment to Cabin John, the most common responses would likely be: a) for the peace and quiet; b) living closer to nature; and c) living near the Potomac. For me, it was to wake up to birdsong every morning instead of the jarring sounds of sirens around Dupont Circle. I wanted to hear the nocturnal hoots of owls instead of car alarms going off. When relatives visited us from New York City, they were startled by the explosion of bird song and then would proclaim the place paradise.

This column is part lament to our “Paradise Lost” and part how-to guide to regain our little stretch of paradise. Let’s dispense with the lament. With increasing frequency, I see the telltale yellow signage on freshly mowed lawns warning that the grass has been sprayed with chemicals that could be toxic to pets.

Illustrations by Trudy Nicholson



and children. But what about the birds and butterflies that make our neighborhood such a pleasant place to stroll? Rachel Carson, a local who birded along our towpath in her spare time, alerted us to the perils of spraying chemicals—DDT in particular—in her classic *Silent Spring*. Yet, decades later, somehow, the chemical and lawn care companies have convinced the average homeowner and citizens’ associations to think that the epitome of civilization is a green lawn populated by non-native grasses. It is not. A green lawn maintained by chemicals and fertilizers is not natural, it is a green desert. Nor are our exotic shrubs natural. Our native creatures did not evolve with these species of plants and so, often, do not pollinate them. Nor is it natural or ecologically appropriate to continue pumping more greenhouse gasses from gas-powered lawnmowers and blowers into the atmosphere to keep our green monsters “tidy.”

So, what would be a safer, more beautiful, and ecologically sensitive alternative? What about a lawn or section of lawn devoted to native species that attracts birds, bees, butterflies, moths, and other creatures, that turns it into a vibrant ecosystem right at our doorstep? In 2022, I devoted ten columns to lovely native plants that could replace chemically maintained green lawns. This year’s columns have focused on the fascinating insects that help maintain a sustainable biosphere and attract birds to our yards. This column tries to put it all together. As citizens of Cabin John and more importantly, as citizens of Earth, I believe, we need to do the right thing and explore how to think globally but act locally by re-envisioning our yards as an opportunity to sequester carbon and grow plants as if Mother Nature was our landscaping guide. Climate breakdown is upon us, and we are leaving most of the ecological and financial bills to those who follow us. But we can start to clean up our act now—for the sake of the present as well as the future.

Here are some simple things you can do:

- The single most useful action you can take, even if you want to keep your lawn, is to plant a native oak tree (or better yet, two). I have covered oaks before, but no single group of species feeds more kinds of caterpillars than oak trees, estimated at 350-426 species. The next most useful group includes native (not Japanese) black cherries (*Prunus serotinus*), choke cherries, river birch, box elder, maples, and blueberries, which all feed more than 150 species of caterpillars.
- If you have space in the sun for a garden of helpful herbs, you might try out: goldenrods (82 species of caterpillars); native sunflowers (58 species of caterpillars); wild native strawberries as a ground cover (48 species of caterpillars); native hibiscus (but not the commonly planted Rose of Sharon) (37 species of caterpillars); Joe-pye weeds (31 species); native geranium (25 species of caterpillars); or false indigo (24 species of caterpillars). We grow false indigo, and in addition to producing some of the most beautiful wildflowers in our area, the insect pollinators love them. Do your bees a favor and plant false indigo. Milkweeds: give them a try in sunny spots.
- There are many other natives: Indian pink, ironweed, and turtlehead, to name a few. These species don't attract as many species as the above-mentioned plants but attract specific species of insects many ecologists suggest we should include in our efforts to bring back native species, or to use the term in vogue, rewild. For example, the Baltimore Checkerspot, the state butterfly of Maryland, lays its eggs only on white turtlehead plants, a kind of wild snapdragon.
- If you want to learn more about which natives to grow, an excellent guide, prepared for Tennessee but applicable to our area, offers some great suggestions.

<https://blog.wfsu.org/blog-coastal-health/2023/10/bang-for-your-caterpillar-buck-which-plants-host-the-most/?ref=blogemail>

You can obtain many of the suggested plants at local native plant nurseries in our area, as well as advice on how to prepare your lawn for an ecological makeover, or by mail order.

Think of it this way: if there were a referendum nationally to create new wildlands the size of the state of Florida, most Americans would probably vote for such an initiative. Rewilding is now taking root around the world. Perhaps the best example, although controversial among scientists, is the reintroduction of wolves to the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem. We don't need to bring wolves back to our front yards, but endangered bumblebees wouldn't be a bad thing, or a Baltimore Checkerspot in a damp area full of turtlehead. Ironically, geographic information specialists estimate that currently, an area estimated to be equal to the size of Florida is devoted to maintaining suburban lawns. If we could only give an area the size of Rhode Island, let alone Florida, back to nature the rewilding of suburbia would be an ecological triumph.

And how can residents of Cabin John and Montgomery County help out? Well for starters, those leaves falling from the maples and oaks and sycamores in your yard? Let them be. Overwintering caterpillars that fall from the trees as they become inactive for the winter, for example, lay dormant under the protective cover of fallen leaves. When you walk through the park or the Cabin John Creek trail, the trail and the forest floor are covered by the copper-colored leaves of beech trees, or the light browns of chestnut oaks, or the yellow of tulip poplars. The fallen leaves, as they turn to mulch, naturally re-fertilize our forests. The same, on a smaller scale, could be true for our yards if cared for with nature in mind.

Just imagine, if you planted natives, and left the fallen leaves to enrich your gardens and give habitat to our overwintering creatures, in these new circumstances, the relative quiet in the absence of gas-powered lawnmowers and blowers would restore paradise, through rewilding.

So, please neighbors, join the movement.

