



GOING NATIVE
The first phase of the KVIS Downtown Beautification project included installing primarily native plants that support birds and pollinators without the use of any pesticides, fertilizers, or watering.

Green Grass

CHANGING LOCAL LAWN CARE ONE YARD AT A TIME

// BY ELLEN BEST

» DID YOUR grandparents worry about a healthy yard? What's outside American suburban front doors has evolved over the generations into what our culture now holds in high regard: the weed-free, verdant lawn. This notion is now being challenged, however, especially among a growing number of concerned Bedford residents.

Why? A "healthy-looking" yard may involve the use of pesticides and herbicides—anything to maintain the uniformly green grass carpet. However, a truly healthy yard starts by eliminating the harmful chemicals as they can seep

into the drinking water and eventually cause health problems, according to Dr. Diane Lewis, creator of The Great Healthy Yard Project. Plus, she says, "the health of plants and the nutrition of produce are based on the health of the soil; the chemicals kill the life in the soil culture." Lewis tests her soil, adds mineral amendments, if necessary, and uses the leaves to mulch beds and mow back into the lawn. Her lawn is doing just fine.

Lynn Becker of Trout Lily Garden Designs in Katonah says rather than raking or blowing, she started mulching leaves in her yard many years

ago "because I was lazy and cheap and had no time to do it with kids and a full-time job." At first, she just left the leaves there to decompose and then began mowing over them. The chopped up leaves fell between the grass blades, decomposing and nourishing the soil. "Clover and dandelions are not

weeds," she maintains, "they are important early sustenance for pollinators, and they're beautiful!" In other areas, she used the leaves to cover her vegetable beds, placing tomato plants into holes in the leafy cover the following spring, resulting in a bountiful harvest.

After mulching the leaves



"GREENING" YOUR LAWN

- 1) Eliminate chemical fertilizers/herbicides.
- 2) Aerate the lawn in the fall.
- 3) Overseed the lawn in the spring.
- 4) Grow grass to four inches; mow to 3 inches.
- 5) Be patient.

into the grass, Philippine de Haan, founder of healthyyards.org, says the next step is to decrease the overall lawn area with an increased border of native plants to support the local ecology. She is currently transforming her one-acre Bedford lawn that was previously treated with insecticides into a pollinator garden. The first few years were difficult, with pests and drought. Once the plants were established, however, it was a breeze. "The speed at which the bees, birds, and insects multiplied was really amazing and is what keeps me optimistic: to see how fast nature can transform and recover," she says.

Pat Keesee has also been pleased with the results of mulching her leaves over the past seven years. She sees more clover and violets growing, and as she incorporates native plants, she finds her yard now takes less care, with no watering and no dead heading of flowers. "I feel like I'm doing a good thing, but I do miss having a huge leaf pile to mulch my shrubs!"

On a municipal level, the Katonah Village Improvement Society worked with the Town of Bedford to transform the overgrown downtown median into a sustainable native plant garden that requires minimal maintenance and attracts butterflies.

In addition to encouraging the health and ecological components of a healthy yard, Bedford will be addressing the use of leaf blowers starting in 2018. The noise issue is the biggest complaint, though the gas blowers also pollute the air and damage plants and soil. Town Supervisor Chris Burdick and his task force are committed to adopting a regulation to limit the summer use of gas leaf blowers. Yes, some landscapers use electric leaf blowers that are less noisy, but they still damage the terrain.

Although Diane Lewis claims that 17% of the land in Bedford has been committed to not using chemicals, what will

it take for more landowners to get on board? de Haan thinks that homeowners just don't want to be bothered, leaving their longtime landscapers to continue what they do. "The landscapers are in business to do what the customers want," adds John Fry, a member Bedford 2020's Water and Land Use Task Force.

Perhaps a broader change of mindset could be what's needed. According to acclaimed entomologist Doug Tallamy, we need to "redefine our concept of neat" by making more ecological landscaping choices. That may mean redefining and accepting some beneficial weeds in your healthy yard.

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