

## Healing the Earth For the Children

Writer Julia Ann Charpentier  
speaks with natural landscape  
pioneer Lorrie Otto

photos by Ney Tail Fraser

**E**ighty-nine-year-old Lorrie Otto is the motivation behind the natural landscape movement. As a young mother living in suburban Wisconsin, she turned her family's one-acre property of lawn, tulip beds and Norway spruces back to nature, to the consternation of neighbors and town officials. She and her husband cut down all the non-native spruces and planted asters, golden-rod and ferns. Then, after witnessing the destructive spraying of DDT in the 1950s and '60s, she became a founding board member of the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and the Citizens Natural Resources Association, leading the assault on DDT. In 1970, Wisconsin was the first state to outlaw it. In 1999, she was inducted into its Conservation Hall of Fame. She would like everyone to reintroduce native plant life into their yards, replacing sterile "immoral" lawns.



**JC:** I understand that the Wild Ones native plant and natural landscaping advocacy organization was founded on your environmental philosophy. If you had to explain this to someone unacquainted with your naturalist stance, what would you say? What is your philosophy?

**LO:** My first reason for not wanting to have lawns around houses would still be for the excitement and pleasure of my children... children everywhere. I lived here [village of Bayside, Wisconsin] maybe three years, and then the sewer line came through. The wonderful wild meadows were gone. Within a year all the lots were sold off, and everything became lawn. It had been just lovely – little stream going past the house, woods on

one side, lawn on the other, and many little evergreen trees. When I looked around and saw the lawns everywhere, I had to do something better for my children. I didn't know much about native wildflowers. I just knew that destroying habitat was too dull.

**JC:** How many species of animals, insects and plants do people destroy when they do the "normal" procedure in their yards with chemicals?

**LO:** Oh, my gosh, they take just about everything. It should be the other way around, you know: What's left? They introduce a kind of grass that doesn't belong in our part of the country and then they shear it down so that nothing can

live in it. Prairie plant roots go deeper than many trees, so they really break up the soil. Soil insects we need to aerate and add to its richness. If you go into a garden center and read the labels on the bottles, they brag about all these bad things that this chemical kills. The majority of the insects in the soil we don't want killed. We need healthy, good soils to grow the plants, and we need the plants to feed the animals and the birds.

I know many women have beautifully decorated homes and they'll change the draperies every three or four years. They have patterned upholstery and Oriental rugs and lovely artwork. Then they open the door, and what do they look at? A bleak, poisoned lawn.

We don't need to go up north to find good smells and diversity of Divine and quiet. Suburbia could be that way...beginning with the drainage ditches in Buyside. We have an ordinance: You're supposed to keep it mowed. It should be just the opposite. We should turn all those ditches at the edges of our lawns into rain gardens.

**JC:** Didn't you once have a disruptive incident when the city came in and actually mowed your wildflowers down? You had to stop them.

**LO:** That was years ago. I used to get all kinds of calls. Once I went to Indianapolis to defend a man who was in trouble with the city ordinance because he had let his grass grow.

And then we had a lovely case with a man who worked for the forestry department, and he had his degree in plant succession. He came from an eastern college and, then after he had finished his graduate work, joined the U.S. Department of Forestry. He let one part of his land grow to see what the succession of plants would be from raw soil in this new subdivision. It was an old farmer's field before then. And he wanted to watch the succession of plants and ran into trouble with the city. And that was just a lovely, lovely trial.... Should have been televised. This man mows down the law, not the grass!

**JC:** Some people believe that they've got to tame nature or bad consequences will result. If somebody leaves the land alone, as you have and as this man you were just describing has, what are the worst results that could occur? Are there any drawbacks?

**LO:** You really can't leave it alone because we have weed laws to protect the farmers. You wouldn't want poison ivy. You wouldn't want burdocks. Our highly beneficial and gentle, intelligent little bats get caught in them, and the warblers get caught, especially the goldfinches.

You don't want to have the species that don't belong on our continent. And some native wildflowers are so aggressive that, unless you put another plant next to them just as aggressive, they will take over your whole garden.

**JC:** What sort of person – what age group – is the most difficult to convince to get rid of a lawn and go with natural landscaping?

**LO:** For many years, I gave a lecture called "Healing the Earth." Young people used to come up afterwards and say, "Oh, I'm going to do this as soon as my children are out of school." And I say, "Well, for heaven's sake, you should go home and do it right now because you're going to do it *for* your children." I've never seen children playing on a front lawn. Have you?

**JC:** Some look at a wild piece of land and think of skin rashes and diseases from mosquitoes and allergic reactions to bee stings.

**LO:** That's one of the reasons why it's so important to start our children out when they're little. I mean... children love the ants and any kind of bug or beetle they can find. They're interested in the chrysalises and the cocoons, butterflies in the lawns. But, you're right. There are a lot of people, a lot of young mothers, who are absolutely terrified they'll be stung or bitten or poisoned. I don't know why they're so turned off, when insects are so interesting. They're so wonderful. .

**JC:** This psychological compulsion to dominate Mother Nature – it's at the root of the environmentalist's problem. Where do you think this belief originated?

**LO:** When we first came to this country, it was important that you clear the land. They didn't want the Indians sneaking up and stealing their horses!

**JC:** Land developers will claim that it was originally uninhabitable.

**LO:** What do we go out and camp for? I keep thinking how absolutely gorgeous suburbia could be. It could be so beautiful and so quiet, and the climate...our houses could be shaded with not one or two little trees that you put in front. Just dump leaves all over your lawn in the fall. In the springtime, plant a lot of little trees and watch your woodlands grow up around you.

**JC:** In the 1970s, pollution was at a dangerously high level in the United States.

**LO:** I was driving over River Edge and I had the car radio on. A river in Ohio had caught on fire. And a week later, it



Lorrie Otto has planted the seeds of natural landscaping in the hearts of thousands. They, in turn, have left a legacy to future generations by returning their own patches of lawn to Nature.

caught on fire again. I thought, "What on earth are we doing on the land that we have such disrespect for a river that we have it so polluted?"

**JC:** DDT was in widespread use in the 1950s and '60s. You witnessed the horrible effects it had on wildlife when it was legal.

**LO:** My two children and my husband and I used to spend all our Sunday mornings in the woods. When the village started to spray, there was an astonishing loss of life. The salamanders disappeared. The grass snakes disappeared. The luna moths disappeared. I picked, in one morning, a bushel basketful of dead robins that had died since dawn. We used

to have so many robins that my children learned to count by counting robins. Wrens no longer sang around your house in the springtime and summertime. It was quiet. Just as Rachel Carson said, "We had Silent Spring." Warblers would just fall out of the trees.

When we finally stopped spraying DDT, it was 20 years before I saw a robin. It was 22 years before I saw one with a speckled breast – a successful hatching of robins. Every single stream, every single lake, including enormous Lake Michigan, had DDT in the fish. We started out with 63 eagles in nests around Lake Michigan. It was down to two or three eagle nests, raising only one little eaglet.

**JC:** What do you still hope to achieve? You're still very active. What have you not accomplished that you would still like to?

**LO:** Bless your heart for asking me. I would like to get real publicity for my seminar so that all the people who are afraid to get rid of their lawns – and yet their consciences are motivating them – can begin.

Why are we managing our land with power equipment? It just seems so unpatriotic and even immoral. It's immoral that it destroys the life, but it's unpatri-

otic that we're using energy – fossil fuel. I mean, it's been a disgrace for years that it makes all that noise, but now, the situation of energy...and it's an air pollutant. Five percent of the pollution that's from the air is from lawnmowers in our country.

We have ordinances that say you have to mow your ditch and there are some cities that say you can't have any rain growth over eight inches tall. And they don't do anything about saying, "No. You must not put poison on your land." It's so poisonous that we put a sticker out that says children are not to play on that grass, or their pets, until it gets really dried out. You see all these warning signs. I have no idea why we would allow people to do that – it seems incredible. It just doesn't make sense that we're treating the Earth with such disdain.

I just think that some people would like to know how much fun it is to give up that lawn, and how good they'd feel because they're doing it.

**JC:** If you had to sum it up in just a few words, what is the biggest threat to the environment today?

**LO:** Overpopulation. The earth is finite. It can sustain just so much life, and we've got too much of it, even if we all

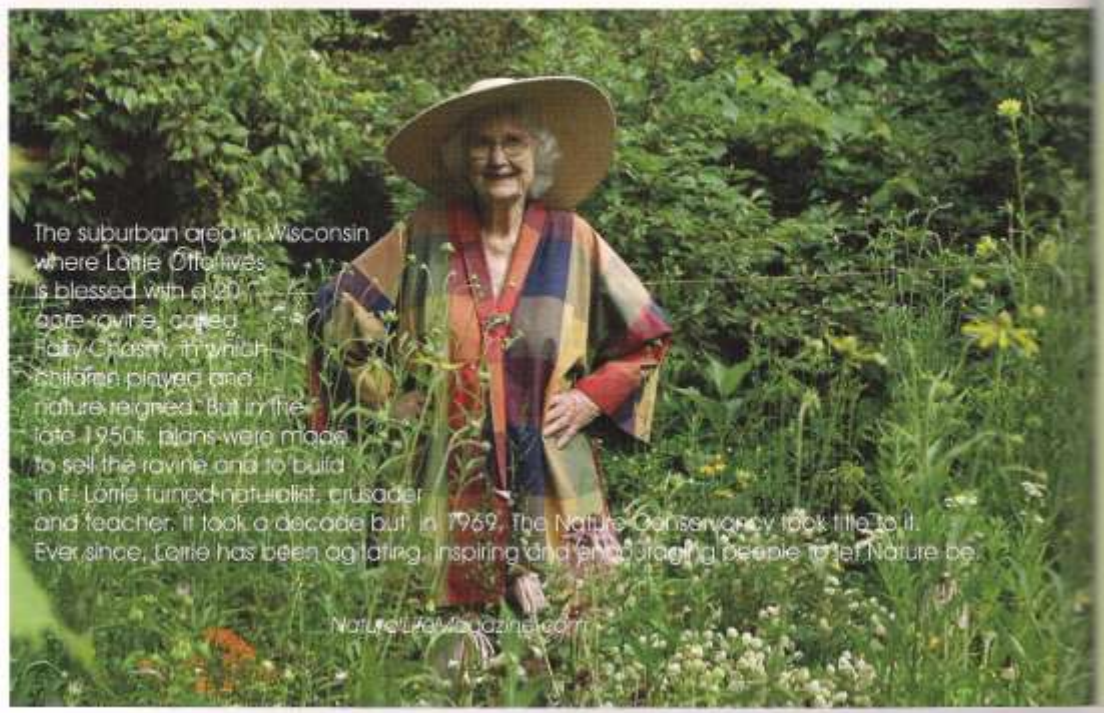
lived as lightly as I do on the earth... I've never had a clothes dryer. I've never had a dishwasher or a garbage disposal or air conditioning. I drive a Prius [hybrid] car. Hang all my clothes on the line – I just finished doing it. What a gorgeous day! We have too many people, just too many people. But we're stuck with that many people, and we can behave much, much better. And as I said we first started out: Suburbia could be so gorgeous. It could be so gorgeous. Ban the use of power lawnmowers. Ban the use of chemicals to control our environment.

*Julia Ann Charpentier is a freelance writer and editor. She holds a Master of Arts in the Humanities from California State University. Her articles, interviews and reviews have appeared in trade and consumer publications. She edits fiction and nonfiction for independent book publishers.*

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## Learn More

Wild Ones  
[www.for-wild.org](http://www.for-wild.org)



The suburban area in Wisconsin where Lottie Ottavio lives is blessed with a 20-acre ravine, called Fairy Chasm, in which children played and nature reigned. But in the late 1950s, plans were made to sell the ravine and to build in it. Lottie turned naturalist, crusader and teacher. It took a decade but, in 1969, The Nature Conservancy took title to it. Ever since, Lottie has been agitating, inspiring and encouraging people to let Nature be.

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