

Local News  
**The Seattle Times**

## Environmentalist Lorrie Otto dies

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**Lorrie Otto, founder of the natural-landscaping movement and crusader against DDT, has died. She was 90.**

By [Nancy Bartley](#)

She was the voice for “the little things,” the bugs, the butterflies and the birds. And she spent her life campaigning against lawns and pesticides.

There was no living thing that was insignificant to Lorrie Otto, and in her role as educator, writer and ardent environmentalist, she often told people, “We have to care. ... Nothing is too small.”

Mrs. Otto, who lived with her daughter in Bellingham, died Saturday (May 29) at age 90 after a brief illness. As she wished, she’ll be buried at the Greenacres Memorial Park’s The Meadow, a “green” cemetery in Ferndale where only biodegradable materials are used and embalming isn’t allowed.

A farmer’s daughter born in Wisconsin, Mrs. Otto was intrigued at an early age by the freshly turned soil behind her father’s horse-drawn plow and was aware of the life it supported. Later as a pilot — she joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots during World War II — she was intrigued to see the family farm’s lush, hand-terraced hills from the air, a sharp contrast to the barren, muddy hillsides of adjacent property.

Mrs. Otto’s environmental interest continued to grow as the use of DDT became more common in the late 1950s and the 1960s. She began to campaign against its use, even collecting a basket of dead robins to take to community meetings in Bayside, Wis., to show officials.

At first she was met with hostility, since DDT then was not only considered safe but also was effective against elm blight and mosquitoes. But Charles Wurster, one of the

founders of the Environmental Defense Fund, who was a young scientist when he met Mrs. Otto, said in an interview that her help made a landmark Wisconsin lawsuit over DDT use possible. It was a case that set others in motion.

“Lorrie was forthright, honest and courageous,” said Carol Chew, a longtime friend.

She had “strong, determined character but was always gentle and compassionate. [She] contributed a great deal more than her share in any endeavor [and] possessed great wisdom,” Chew said. She was “an inspiration to all those who love and value nature.”

Mrs. Otto founded the natural-landscaping movement, which first brought her into conflict with her neighbors and the city of Bayside as she let her grass grow long and removed several nonnative trees from her yard.

Later, her back-to-nature landscaping was so beautiful that her garden was included in a book of prominent American gardens, nearly all on estates.

Over the years, Mrs. Otto became known for her essays, speeches and radio talks about natural landscaping. She spoke at gatherings around the country and received many awards for her work, including from the National Audubon Society, the National Wildlife Federation and praise from former Vice President Al Gore.

Mrs. Otto graduated from the University of Wisconsin, where she met her future husband, Owen Otto, a psychiatrist. They eventually divorced after a long marriage. They had two children: a son, who died several years ago and a daughter, Patricia Otto, of Bellingham.

Services have not yet been arranged. As Mrs. Otto had planned before her death, her gravesite will be marked as simply as she lived. Engraved on a river rock will be one word only: Lorrie.

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