

OBITUARIES | LORRIE OTTO

# 'Nature Lady' Otto helped lead DDT fight

She began with natural yards, progressed to national causes



Lorrie Otto (left) leads the "Natural Landscape Tour" along the banks of Lake Michigan in the 9700 block of N. Lake Drive. A video crew from NBC News photographed the event for a segment. Credit: Michael Sears

*By Amy Rabideau Silvers of the Journal Sentinel*

June 02, 2010



Lorrie Otto understood that it wasn't nice to mess with Mother Nature.

And so the woman known as "the Nature Lady" planted her Bayside yard with native species and wildflowers - fighting for the right to keep her land natural and teaching others how to do the same. She rose to become

an environmental warrior, a leader in the battle to ban DDT in Wisconsin and then nationally.

She shared her vision that average people could make a difference by eliminating the standard lawn for more ecological alternatives. The well-manicured lawn was not, she said, a healthy green space.

"They look like golf courses," Otto once said, then corrected herself.

"They look like cemeteries."

Otto died of natural causes Saturday in Bellingham, Wash., where she moved in 2008 to be near her daughter. She was 90.

Otto served as a founder and leader with groups including Citizens Natural Resources Association of Wisconsin, the Riveredge Nature Center and Wild Ones. She became a nationally recognized naturalist and speaker, called "the godmother of natural landscaping." Media credits include everything from Martha Stewart Living to "NBC Nightly News."

"In recent years, a New Yorker article credited her and Rachel Carson for leading the movement," said daughter Tricia Otto, referring to the author of the famous book "Silent Spring."

Otto was named to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 1999. The Schlitz Audubon Center's annual natural yards tour is named in her honor.

"If suburbia were landscaped with meadows, prairies, thickets or forests, or combinations of these, then the water would sparkle, fish would be good to eat again, birds would sing and human spirits would soar," Otto said.

She was born Mary Lorraine Stoeber, taking the name Lorrie after marriage. She grew up on a family dairy farm in Middleton and graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

During World War II, she saw an advertisement for the Women Airforce Service Pilots - what the ad called the "Cream of the Crop" - her daughter said.

"You had to be college-educated and have a pilot's license," Tricia said. "She went to the local airport and, with her own money, became a pilot."

WASP pilots were civilians and the first women to fly American military planes. Just before she graduated, the war was coming to an end and the program quickly disbanded. She married her high school sweetheart, Owen Otto, and they settled in Bayside about 1952.

For Otto, the battles for natural landscaping and against DDT began in her own yard.

The former farm girl planted the family's yard in a natural way, mostly to create "an enchanting place for my children to play."

Soon Otto was confronting what she called "the lawn police" in Bayside. One day, a crew arrived and mowed part of her yard. She fought back, proving that her yard might look wild but that it did not contain weeds.

"She was so passionate," Tricia said. "She would appear in court as an expert witness to defend someone whose yard was being persecuted."

In the late 1950s, she learned of plans to develop the Fairy Chasm woodland area in her area. "She finally triumphed in 1969, when the Nature Conservancy purchased Fairy Chasm," according to a copyrighted article by the National Wildlife Federation.

Those were also the days of routine DDT spraying, first to kill mosquitoes and then to kill the beetles destroying elm trees.

"Robins would go into convulsions. . . . I'd see the dead robins near the road," she told The Milwaukee Journal in 1992. "Red bats would be dangling dead in the rosebushes."

"She carried big bushel baskets of dead robins into village hall," Tricia said. The official response ranged from indifferent to angry. "They said, 'What do you want, lady, birds or trees?' "

Otto took the fight to the state level, finally deciding to sue. She contacted the Environmental Defense Fund, a fledgling out-of-state group that won a

national reputation for action in Wisconsin. In 1970, Wisconsin banned the use of DDT. The federal ban was approved in 1972.

"She invited scientists from all over the country to her house, and they worked on the paper to present to Congress to get the ban on DDT," said Dorothy Boyer, a friend and president of the Milwaukee North chapter of Wild Ones. "She had scientists sleeping in sleeping bags in her living room."

Years later, she was still making new friends and encouraging others. One younger couple, Susannah and Lon Roesselet, began their own natural landscaping in Bayside a few years ago.

"One day the doorbell rang and this little white-haired woman was there, saying, 'Hello, my name is Lorrie Otto,' " Susannah Roesselet said. "We knew about her. She stepped in and became our mentor. Our entire yard is now natural; she is everywhere. She'll be missed, but she left her mark."

When Otto finally had to leave her own home, she moved to Washington state to live with her daughter on a hundred acres of natural land.

"She was just having a ball," Tricia said. "Living here, she said, you could believe the world was happy and whole."

And Otto made plans for her own last plot of land, delighted to find a green burial cemetery and planting flowers on what would be her own grave. She will be buried without benefit of embalming or chemicals, returning to the earth she loved.

Otto is also survived by her sister, Betty Larson.

A Wisconsin gathering is being planned by friends.



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