

LORRIE OTTO - THE "HEART AND SOUL" OF NATURAL LANDSCAPING

Lorrie Otto, now in her 78th year of life, was raised on her father's dairy farm nestled amongst the rolling hills of south-central Wisconsin. Here, the seeds of land stewardship and the wonder of living things were sown deep within her character.

After earning a degree in Related Arts from the University of Wisconsin, Lorrie, her husband and her two small children moved to Bayside, 15 minutes north of Milwaukee. It was here that her love for plants surfaced and merged with her creative talents. She began planting things that would help give her children an interesting place to play. Lorrie even stopped mowing a large area of her front yard when she saw the rosettes of wildflowers struggling to survive beneath the blades of her lawn mower.

When the village mowed her wildflower meadow without warning, Lorrie had her first opportunity to deal with antiquated weed laws that force citizens to maintain sheared, monotonous landscapes. She took village officials on a tour of her yard describing the wonder of each plant that had been destroyed. They conceded that a whole museum of plants had been lost, and a settlement was reached. In years to come, Lorrie would become a powerful defender of others around the country who simply sought the right to landscape naturally.

In the late 1950's, Lorrie learned of plans to develop a 20-acre woodland nearby known as Fairy Chasm. For the next ten years, she worked to save this haven for wildlife and rare plants and was eventually successful in bringing it under The Nature Conservancy protection.

Around this same time, Lorrie became concerned about the number of dead birds she found around her property. The culprit was DDT. DDT was used across the United States at the time to control mosquitoes and the pest that causes Dutch Elm disease. Lorrie succeeded in bringing public hearings on DDT to Wisconsin in 1969. Her efforts to seek out and organize scientists from the United States, Canada, and Sweden, along with lawyers and various witnesses resulted in a ban on the use of DDT in Wisconsin and culminated two years later with a nationwide ban on the pesticide.

In 1970, Lorrie began taking a naturalist training course at Riveredge Nature Center. She also attended a prairie conference in Madison where she learned that wildflowers like those that once grew on her father's farm were now threatened with extinction along with the bird and insect life that they supported. Those experiences dramatically changed her way of thinking. She now realized how important suburban yards could be in maintaining a gene bank of biological diversity and for providing habitat for wildlife. The typical suburban lawn that oozed with chemical runoff, strained drinking water supplies, robbed wildlife of habitat, and demanded the use of nonrenewable fuels to maintain, was suddenly "immoral." Healing the earth and teaching others about the importance of landscaping with native species became her passion.

She began to share her knowledge at every opportunity and started teaching natural landscaping classes. Semester classes were held at Riveredge Nature Center, the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Milwaukee Area Technical School, the Brownport bank (lower level), and Alverno College.

After hearing Lorrie lecture in 1977 at the Schlitz Audubon Center, a group of nine women decided to organize monthly meetings to share information about natural landscaping. They called themselves the Wild Ones. Lorrie soon became their philosophical compass. Under her direction and inspiration, the organization has grown to over 1300 members across the United States and Canada.

Besides becoming a nationally recognized speaker and author, Lorrie's dedication, creativity, and boundless energy have led to numerous other activities to promote and protect native plants. She hosted a monthly cable program on native landscaping, helped influence the re-establishment of native roadsides in some areas of Wisconsin, planted environmental gardens at local schools, acted as a tour guide for the Schlitz Audubon's annual natural yards tour, and continues to lead Mother's Day wildflower hikes in Fairy Chasm. She also works to control foreign invasive plants and the white-tail deer population--both major threats to biodiversity and remaining native vegetation in the Milwaukee area.

Her efforts have brought her national and international acclaim. Besides being featured in numerous publications (including *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times*), and her property being selected as "one of the 32 most beautiful gardens in America" by *American Woman's Garden*, Lorrie received the Margaret Douglas Medal for Conservation Education in 1991 from the Garden Club of America, and in 1993, she received the Canadian Wildflower Society award for significant contributions to the conservation and appreciation of our native wild plants. At a 1996 tribute dinner in her honor, attended by friends and prestigious conservationists from across the nation, the Village of Bayside that mowed her front yard meadow years earlier even presented her with a proclamation commending and congratulating her for her landscaping accomplishments. The Schlitz Audubon annual natural yards tour was also renamed after her, and the "Lorrie Otto Seeds for Education" grant program was established to carry on her efforts at institutions of learning.

Because DDT is no longer a threat, the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon continue to fly overhead, and there may be fewer human cancers. Thanks to Lorrie, schools, businesses, and private yards across the country are now naturally landscaped and providing habitat for wildlife. Lorrie continues to find endless opportunities to tell others about celebrating where they are from by planting native species. In her words, "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."

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF LORRIE OTTO

*Graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1942 with a major in Related Arts.

*Obtained a pilot's license in 1944.

*Offices: Long-time member, past president and current vice-president of Citizens Natural Resources Association, Inc., founding member of the Wisconsin chapter of The Nature Conservancy, current national director and Milwaukee chapter program chair since its conception for Wild Ones--Natural Landscapers, Ltd.

*Instrumental in saving Fairy Chasm from development and bringing it under The Nature Conservancy protection.

In the late 1950's, Lorrie learned of plans to develop a 20-acre woodland near her property known as Fairy Chasm. Since development of the area would supply funds for needed road repairs for her private subdivision, she had to convince her neighbors of the need to save this haven for rare native plants.

Lorrie began reading about native plants and natural areas in order to find the scientific information she needed to support her position. She also approached the late Alvin Throne, a professor of botany at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who had studied the rare species of Fairy Chasm years earlier. He too was aghast that this unique natural area could be lost and joined her crusade. After they convinced a reporter to look over the site and write a supporting article for a local newspaper, Lorrie put a copy of it in each of her neighbor's mailboxes. Residents voted to save the area.

Lorrie's battle was not over, however. Some time later, the city of Mequon was about to put a sewer line through the center of Fairy Chasm. Doing so would save thousands of taxpayer dollars by using this shortcut to another service area. Lorrie once again sprang into action. She persuaded several gifted writers in the area to compose letters to the mayor of Mequon explaining why Fairy Chasm was so important. Lorrie then had 400 booklets containing these writings professionally produced, complete with a cover drawn by a gifted wildflower artist, and distributed copies of it to local residents.

Lorrie's own essay, with portions taken from her diary, described Fairy Chasm this way: "Some people see the Fairy Chasm woods as a resting, nesting, and feeding area for migrating and resident birds, a sanctuary free from the poisonous pollutions of a man-managed land. Some think of these twenty acres as a pool of oxygen refreshing our air, or, think of it as a sponge of humus, holding the rains to replenish the water table. To a few, it's a quiet area to soothe ears and souls surfeited with man's mechanical noises. To still others, it's a place of inspiration, philosophical and artistic. And, to yet another group, it's a

source of satisfaction to know that it is being used by the special minds of special men...This remnant of the original vegetation cannot tolerate any significant disturbance or it will lose its value for future peoples who will need to study the potential of natural resources before man disturbed them."

When the city of Mequon eventually decided to extend the sewer line around the site, Fairy Chasm was once again saved from destruction.

In 1969, the land was donated to The Nature Conservancy and is now permanently protected.

*Became a powerful defender of those willing to challenge ecologically unsound weed laws.

Lorrie's first encounter with misguided weed laws was a personal one. She had gone to a great deal of trouble to naturalize her yard in the 1950s. Since nurseries did not sell native wildflowers at that time, Lorrie had to find hers along roadsides or in farmers' fields. When the village weed commissioner received a call complaining about her unmowed front yard, a village worker showed up and mowed it without her permission or notification. Many of the plants that had been destroyed could not be replaced.

Lorrie was enraged. She persuaded the village president, the village attorney, and the weed commissioner to visit her property. As she took them on a tour of her yard, similar to the tour she used for her daughter's Brownie troop, she described the wonders of all that had been destroyed and insisted that "natural landscaping is a public good, not a health hazard." The attorney later conceded that a whole museum of plants had been lost, and a settlement was reached.

In years to come, Lorrie would become a powerful defender of others who sought the right to landscape naturally. According to Lorrie, "Weed laws are nothing more than conformity laws that force citizens to maintain sheared, poisoned, monotonous, sterile landscapes."

In 1972, Lorrie successfully defended Ruth Grothenrath, an artist from Milwaukee whose wildflowers were threatened to be cut by the city. She then organized a defense team in 1974 for other natural landscapers who were prosecuted for violating outdated and misapplied weed laws. The team consisted of David Kopitzke, a Milwaukee Public Museum botanist, and Andy Larsen, the naturalist director of Riveredge Nature Center. In 1974, they convinced Milwaukee to drop charges against Emeline Krause, a noted plant illustrator whose yard was filled with wildflowers.

Then, in 1976, a landmark court case provided a major victory for natural landscapers. Donald Hagar, a wildlife biologist from New Berlin, Wisconsin, was charged with violating his city's weed ordinance. Because his grass exceeded the city's twelve inch limit, he faced a \$4,000 fine for refusing to mow it. Lorrie came

to his defense assembling the lawyers, money, and scientists necessary to convince Judge William E. Gramling that New Berlin's weed ordinance was unconstitutional. Hagar, in Lorrie's words, "did not submit to the insidious peer pressure which forces suburbanites to mimic each other and preen their yards into lifeless, artificial landscapes."

During the trial, the city maintained that Hagar's natural yard was a fire hazard, a haven for rats, and created health problems by producing pollen. With the help of Attorney David Kinnemen, all the contentions were disproved. In fact, it was discovered during the trial that the city had actually overlooked some truly noxious weeds such as Canada thistle and ragweed that were growing at city hall and in the mayor's front yard, but not on Hagar's property. After the case was struck down, Lorrie concluded that the individuals that enforce the weed laws "don't know one plant from another. They are regulating height, not weeds. The laws are backward. People should be forced to have natural yards, not grass."

In the years that followed, Lorrie became a clearing house for others around the country who were struggling with weed laws that were inappropriate for natural landscapes. Most cases have ended favorably for natural yards.

Another example of the progress that has been made in this area came in 1994 when Lorrie spoke at a weed ordinance workshop. It was attended by fifty municipal officials seeking to learn how natural landscaping could fit within their communities. Ironically, municipal officials who once opposed Lorrie's gardening philosophy now sought her advice.

*Creator of "One of the 32 Most Beautiful Gardens in America," selected by American Woman's Garden, 1984.

When Lorrie first moved to Bayside in the early 1950s, her property looked like a typical suburban yard with over 60 Norway spruce and a large lawn. Shortly thereafter, she began to plant and encourage native wildflowers to grow in her yard to provide an interesting place for her children to play and learn. She wanted them to be able to experience a wildflower meadow like those she remembered on her father's farm while growing up. To the dismay of her neighbors, she also began cutting the Norway spruce to make room for more native plants.

Then, in 1970, after attending a naturalist training course at Riveredge Nature Center and a prairie conference in Madison, Lorrie learned that many of the wildflowers that she remembered from her youth on the farm were threatened with extinction along with the wildlife that they supported. Those experiences dramatically changed her way of thinking. She now realized how important suburban yards could be in maintaining a gene bank of biological diversity and for providing habitat for wildlife. The typical suburban lawn that oozed with chemical runoff, strained drinking water supplies, robbed wildlife of habitat, and demanded the use of nonrenewable fuels to maintain, was suddenly "immoral."

Lorrie started in her own yard. Although she already had many native plants, she also had a lawn and many nonnative species. She now wanted her yard to be so appealing to wildlife that it would appear as if her house simply dropped out of the sky and landed in a field of native plants. Her lawn was eliminated and gentle winding paths were installed to provide easy accessibility to all areas of her property. According to Lorrie, "Instead of one community looking like another across America, we should celebrate our native plant heritage and put it on display."

Lorrie also had her asphalt driveway removed when she became concerned about erosion and her driveway's inability to absorb rainwater. She had it replaced with turfstone. This type of concrete block not only provides a solid surface for driving but also allows vegetation to grow up through it, absorbs rainwater, and helps renew groundwater supplies. (See photos).

Lorrie's yard is now a popular stop for natural yard tours and attracts hundreds of site seers, photographers, landscapers, ecologists, and others from as far away as Europe each year. Audubon interns also frequently reside at Lorrie's home to obtain first-hand knowledge of how native landscaping can be done. Chosen by Schlitz Audubon Center as the "cream of the crop" of future environmental teachers, interns have said that living with Lorrie is not only fun and educational, it is an inspiration. (Lorrie houses these young people and provides most of their board with little or not remuneration as a service to the Audubon).

*Is considered the "godmother" of natural landscaping.

Although others before Lorrie's time had proclaimed the importance of natural landscaping in nature preserves, parks, and other natural areas, Lorrie was the first to bring it to ordinary residential yards. Craig Tufts, the National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Wildlife Habitat Administrator, gives Lorrie much of the credit for the success of his program calling her the "heart and soul" of the natural landscaping movement. The National Wildlife Federation now has over 15,000 certified backyard habitats for wildlife that emphasize native species and limit or totally avoid lawn space.

Bookstore shelves are now packed with information about natural landscaping. Cities (such as Fort Collins, Colorado, Novato, California, and Long Grove, Illinois) actively promote or legislate the practice by its citizens. Many school yards across middle America have planted prairies, and businesses have discovered that natural landscaping can be both economical and beautiful.

Lorrie Otto, also called "the Rosa Parks of natural landscaping," is credited with planting the seeds of this movement and continues to inspire its growth today.

*Seeking every opportunity to share her knowledge about natural landscaping with others, Lorrie taught semester classes on natural

landscaping at Riveredge Nature Center, the Milwaukee Public Museum, the Milwaukee Area Technical School, the Brownport bank (lower level), and Alverno College.

*Inspiration for the creation of the national organization, Wild Ones--Natural Landscapers, Ltd.

Wild Ones is a direct result of a natural landscaping workshop that was held at the Schlitz Audubon Center, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1977. Lorrie had been a speaker at this workshop. Nine women in attendance became intensely interested in natural landscaping as an alternative to the typical suburban yard. Upon the suggestion of Gini Lindow, they decided to hold monthly meetings to exchange information in 1979. They called themselves the Wild Ones. Lorrie soon became their philosophical compass. Under her inspiration and guidance the organization has grown to over 1300 members in thirty states, three Canadian provinces, and twelve local chapters. The Environmental Protection Agency also uses Wild Ones information on natural landscaping for the internet (<http://www.epa.gov/glnpo>, "Green Landscaping with Native Plants").

Wild Ones activities include:

- "Bulldozer alerts" or "plant rescues" to remove native plants from areas about to be developed. The plants are then used in the yards of members to enhance their own landscapes, or in parks, school yards, etc.

- Monthly meetings to exchange information, hear experts speak and show slides on various topics related to natural landscaping and natural areas restoration, exchange seeds, tour naturally landscaped yards, or visit pristine natural areas.

- Publication of a bi-monthly newsletter entitled "Wild Ones Journal."

- Exhibits on natural landscaping at various local functions.

*Was a catalyst for establishing a ban on the use of DDT in the United States.

DDT, an insecticide developed during World War II, was later used across the United States to control mosquitoes and the beetle that causes Dutch elm disease. Unfortunately, it also killed birds and other beneficial insects and altered the reproductive processes of fish and meat-eating birds by causing them to lay fewer eggs. Eggs laid by some birds had such thin shells that they broke during the nesting period.

Before DDT was banned, it was detected in fish in every Wisconsin lake and in the breast milk of mothers, bald eagles were unable to lay eggs with shells, and the peregrine falcon was all but extinct.

Even before Lorrie read Silent Spring, the prophetic 1962 book by Rachel Carson that warned of the consequences that man's

frivolous use of pesticides was having on the natural world, Lorrie and her children were alarmed by the growing number of dead birds that they were finding around their property. When Lorrie approached her community officials, asking them to stop spraying DDT, they said "What do you want, Mrs. Otto, trees or birds? Besides, what difference does it make since everyone else is doing it?"

Lorrie was undeterred. She attracted attention during a hearing on DDT in Madison in 1967 when she took a dead robin and a dead bat out of her purse and plopped them on the table. She obtained scientific support from internationally famous, Dr. Joseph Hickey, whom she met previously through their mutual association with the Citizens Natural Resources Association and The Nature Conservancy. A wildlife biologist from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Hickey had established a scientific link between DDT and declining bird populations.

Armed with a huge collection of scientific information provided by Dr. Hickey, Lorrie then contacted the Environmental Defense Fund. A fledgling organization from Long Island, New York, EDF sought to use the court system to expose the hazards of DDT. Lorrie convinced them to bring their battle to Wisconsin.

Fledging financial support from the Citizens Natural Resources Association, Lorrie arranged for accommodations for EDF personnel and expert witnesses who came from all over the United States, Canada, and Sweden. Hearings were held before the late Maurice Van Susteren, a hearing examiner for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. If DDT was determined to be a water pollutant under the DNR's definition, it could not be used in any way that allowed it to enter Wisconsin's waterways.

Considered the glue that held it all together, Lorrie provided her allies with typing, photocopying, messenger services, library facilities, and many other services during the six months of hearings.

The hearings generated considerable media coverage in Wisconsin and nationally. After the hearings adjourned but before the results were known, the Wisconsin legislature, mindful of the extensive media coverage and upcoming elections, passed a bill in 1969 banning DDT from use in the state of Wisconsin. Months later, DNR hearing examiner, Van Susteren anticlimactically declared it a water pollutant as well.

From Wisconsin, the Environmental Defense Fund moved on to Washington. Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson had introduced a bill to ban DDT at the federal level and quoted Lorrie during Senate committee hearings. Before Congress could act on Senator Nelson's bill, however, EDF scientists successfully convinced the Environmental Protection Agency to ban DDT nationwide in 1972.

*Was one of a group of citizens that nurtured the Schlitz Audubon Center, a nature center in Bayside that abutts Lake Michigan, into existence in 1970. Lorrie has been a frequent speaker at Schlitz

and acted as a tour guide for its annual Natural Yards Tour for twelve years. Her property has been a popular stop on the tour, which was recently renamed after her.

*Recipient of the Margaret Douglas Medal for Conservation Education for over thirty years of environmental activism from the Garden Club of America, 1991.

*Received the 1993 Canadian Wildflower Society Award for "significant contributions to the conservation and appreciation of our native wild plants," and for her inspiring campaign to promote native prairie landscaping.

*Wrote environmental essays for Wisconsin Public Radio.

*Is a nationally respected lecturer on the use of native plants. Besides being a frequent speaker (slide presentations) at the Milwaukee Audubon's Natural Landscaping Conference, held at UW-Milwaukee and attracting 600 to 800 people annually, Lorrie has spoken on natural landscaping at prairie conferences, nature centers, churches, high schools, art museums, garden clubs, the Illinois and Wisconsin teacher associations, University of Wisconsin classes, the Chicago Botanic Garden, the Brooklyn New York Botanic Garden, and at the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington.

*Is a gifted author of numerous articles on various topics related to conservation and natural landscaping and currently serves as the mid-west editor for Canada's WILDFLOWER magazine.

*Was the host and producer of "Earthcare," a cable series (36 half hour programs) on native landscaping. Lorrie has also been featured on the television program, "Outdoor Wisconsin."

*Designed, planted, and continues to maintain a woodland environmental garden as a gift to middle school children in Bayside, and helped plant and manage an environmental garden at Indian Hills School. Both schools are now regular stops on the Lorrie Otto Natural Yards Tour.

At a recognition dinner in her honor in 1996, the Lorrie Otto Seeds for Education annual grant program was established to provide funds to institutions of learning to create or carry on natural landscaping efforts dedicated to teaching others.

Believing that diverse native plants provide a stimulating setting for all sorts of learning experiences, Lorrie is adamant about the importance of natural landscaping at learning centers as opposed to their usually barren lawns. In a 1981 interview, Lorrie stated, "What happens in a society when the young are not stimulated by the diversity of life? Since childhood we've been taught that one form of life depends upon another. In adulthood we, in turn, preach it to the young. Yet, in the areas where we could put our learning and teaching into practice--schoolyards, churches, hospitals, roadsides and most obvious of all, our own

EXAMPLES OF PUBLISHED INFORMATION ABOUT LORRIE OTTO

- "They're Wild About Landscaping," Post Crescent, Jan. 16, 1997.
- "A Tribute: Lorrie Otto," WILDFLOWER, by Bret Rappaport, Autumn, 1996.
- "Some plants repel hungry deer," Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 2-4-96.
- "The Blooming of Lorrie Otto," Milwaukee Journal, by Paul Hayes, 6-28-92.
- Successful Flower Gardening; A Pure Prairie Garden, Ortho Books, 1989.
- "The Joe-Pye Weed is Always Taller in the Other Person's Yard," by Ted Williams, AUDUBON, July, 1981
- "Home Lawns Gone Native," by Curt Pendergast, Time-Life Gardening Yearbook, 1978.
- "Lorrie Otto to receive national honor," Milwaukee Journal.
- "Wild Things, Let Them All Grow Naturally," Milwaukee Sentinel, March 24, 1989.
- "Mowers, Growers Now Are Quarreling Over the Back Fence," Wall Street Journal, April 17, 1991.
- "Sisyphus was a Lawn Boy," Christian Science Monitor, June 2, 1980, the Christian Science Publishing Society.
- "Fostering Clean Air Through Environmental Law," The New York Times, May 14, 1995.
- "Letting Your Lawn Run Wild," NEWSWEEK, August 27, 1990.
- "Natural Landscaping: Lessons in Ecology," MOTHERING, Fall, 1995.
- "Lorrie Otto," The American Woman's Garden, Rosemary Verey and Ellen Samuels, c. 1984, A New York Graphic Society Book, Little, Brown and Company.
- "A Native Prairie Home Companion," The San Francisco Chronicle, June 3, 1992.
- "Gardening," NEW YORK TIMES, June 5, 1994.
- "To Mow or Not to Mow," Wm Bryant Logan, HOUSE AND GARDEN, May 1992.
- "Growing With My Yard," by Lorrie Otto, WILDFLOWER, Winter, 1994.
- "Grand Dames," WISCONSIN TRAILS, Fall, 1994 by Judith Woodburn. NORTHSHORE LIFESTYLE, Sept. 1994.
- "American Heros: Godmother of Natural Landscaping," NATIONAL WILDLIFE, April/May, 1996.
- "Wild for Wildflowers," AMERICAN HOME STYLE AND GARDENING, Aug./Sept. 1996.
- Landscaping with Wildflowers, by Jim Wilson, c. 1992, Houghton Mifflin
- Gardening America, Ogden Tanner, c. 1990, Running Heads Inc.
- The Natural Habitat Garden, Ken Druse, c. 1994, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., New York.