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# Where the Wild Things Are

Two Connecticut landscape architects show that respecting nature yields gardens that are equal parts beautiful and environmentally friendly. Just ask the birds, bees, and butterflies.

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BY MEGAN MARGULIES

**T**he classic dream of homeownership usually includes a perfect lawn. But perfection is in the eye of the beholder, and for some people, the traditional swath of velvety, weed-free, green grass isn't quite it. Landscape architects Geoffrey Middleleer, of Middleleer Land Design in Bethel, and Katherine Kamen, of Huelster Design Studio in Westport, count themselves among those who believe there's much beauty to be found in letting nature go a little wild.

The manicured lawn, these pros say, can come with hefty environmental downfalls, including using lots of water to keep grass green, and spreading herbicides, fertilizers, and pesticides to keep dandelions, clover, and other so-called imperfections at bay.

"Most of those products are petroleum-based," says Middleleer, noting that summer showers can send chemicals into the waterways, causing algae blooms that take oxygen out of the water and kill fish.

**ABOVE:** For clients in Wilton, Geoffrey Middleleer transformed an adjoining lot into a scenic natural meadow, complete with a viewing pavilion by Faesy-Smith Architects. **RIGHT:** Native plantings in a "rain garden" by Katherine Kamen of Huelster Design Studio include Joe Pye weed, iris, goldenrod, switchgrass, and white hibiscus.

"For me," he says, "a lawn is much more interesting when it has violets, dandelions, and clover."

Kamen believes that changing homeowners' attitudes about large, green

lawns is the challenge. "The quest for the perfect lawn—green, weedless, and insect-free—should no longer be a status symbol," she says.

For clients in Wilton who had purchased the empty lot next to their home, Middleleer suggested transforming the new space into a meadow. A variety of colorful wildflowers provide almost year-round beauty, and the fact that the meadow doesn't need mowing or watering means the environment benefits, too. The meadow makes a wild contrast to the tidier, more traditional parts of the homeowners' land. "It was about creating an area of the property that was more natural and less manicured," says Middleleer.

Around the edge of the property, Middleleer left a few of the original boulders, and



TOP: COURTESY OF MIDDLELEER LAND DESIGN; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF HUELSTER DESIGN STUDIO





provided a screen from neighbors with eastern hemlocks, birches, and bayberry. “We also built a little walkway that allows you to enjoy the plantings, but doesn’t distract from the minimalism of the landscape,” he says.

Using a wide variety of plants native to New England creates a healthier environment for local insects and animals. Native plants stand a better chance of staying hardy without pesticides than do non-native species. “Many pesticides are non-specific and kill all insects; others, like systemic pesticides, work their way

**TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT:** Original boulders subtly enhanced by native plantings make an understated transition from lawn to woods for one Mideleer Land Design client in New Canaan. On the same property, a gravel drive and parking area provide textural contrast to modern structures by the late Alan Goldberg. **CENTER LEFT:** For this garden, Katherine Kamen mixed native and non-native species to beautifully wild effect. **RIGHT:** Some of the creatures that will flock to such eco-friendly landscapes include (top to bottom) the giant swallowtail, honey bees, and monarch butterfly caterpillars.

through the plant and can make pollen or nectar lethal,” Kamen says.

One property Kamen designed in Westport borders remnant woodlands and tidal stream wetlands. In an effort to work with the local ecology and offer a myriad of species diversity and beauty, Kamen chose a majority of native plants. Her design included an oak tree for its ability to support moths and butterflies, and goldenrod to attract beneficial insects such as bees.

At another Westport home, the existing gardens held a number of non-native plantings, including some ornamental grasses the homeowners wanted to keep.



LEFT, TOP AND BOTTOM: COURTESY OF MIDELEER LAND DESIGN (2); OTHER PHOTOS: COURTESY OF HUELSTER DESIGNSTUDIO (4)

Kamen left some of her clients' favorites, then interwove native species to give birds and insects a reason to visit. "You don't have to have all native plants," she says, "but if you add native species you add to the diversity." Tufted hairgrass, prairie dropseed, switchgrass, and other indigenous grasses, along with colorful perennials including black-eyed Susans, asters, and Echinacea (purple coneflower) increased the biodiversity. "There was one insect that hadn't been there before that showed up as soon as we added the native plants," Kamen says. "That's one of the things that made this job site exciting."

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We all love looking at and listening to birds, but one of Kamen's clients also wanted to create a refuge for little mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Because the property is located in a mostly dry, open landscape, Kamen created three "rain gardens" to catch and hold site runoff, making the gardens more welcoming to wildlife. Beautiful plantings, like native viburnum, with its crisp, white petals, make the people as happy as the butterflies the plants attract.

Designing a landscape plan that makes the most of rainwater is a smart idea, Middleer concurs. For a New Canaan home, he eschewed an asphalt driveway, creating a paved gravel drive instead. The permeable surface lets water get absorbed back into the soil, and has the added benefit of adding attractive texture as a foil to the home's sleek architecture.

By considering the surrounding architecture along with the ecological impact—whether by using native plantings, making use of original boulders, or allowing the dandelions and clover to peek through the blades of grass—Middleer's and Kamen's designs enhance the homes they surround, while treading lightly on the land. •

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** For information about these professionals, see page 138.