

Perfect Earth Project aims to create lawns in the Hamptons that are both beautiful and environmentally friendly.



Pro Natural

EDWINA VON GAL'S NEW ORGANIZATION, PERFECT EARTH PROJECT, AIMS TO RAISE AWARENESS AMONG HAMPTONITES OF THE EFFECTS OF NONORGANIC LAWN CARE. BY PAULA DE LA CRUZ

At the first signs of spring, my Chilean fox terrier, Moai, sheds his winter gloom by frolicking and rolling around on the lawns of Manhattan's Hudson River Park. Inevitably, this results in an eye infection and mild rash, which happens again during the summer when we visit the Hamptons.

The possibility of getting sick from lawns defeats their purpose, which is to bring us joy and make us feel at one with nature. However, "Landowners have a toxin-free choice," says Edwina von Gal, a landscape designer based in Springs and founder of the East Hampton-based nonprofit Perfect Earth Project, which will offer

lectures and courses in Bridgehampton this summer to teach homeowners and landscapers safe lawn-care practices. "Pesticide-free lawns are not harder to maintain."

Often, asserts von Gal, the organic movement has failed to provide conclusive supporting data for its claims, which makes it harder for people to understand the importance of pesticide-free environments. "A toxin-free lawn is easier to maintain than meeting all the pesticide protocols," she says. "It doesn't cost more, doesn't look any different, and, if anything, [the lawn] is more vibrant because it is part of a complete ecosystem."

Von Gal is adamant that "a healthy lawn starts with good soil." Test your soil first, and add organic matter if it is compacted, i.e., the ground is so compressed roots can't grow into the soil and water can't appropriately drain.

In early spring, the soil is saturated with water from winter snowfall, so there is no need to irrigate it. "If you see fungus, leave it alone and it will resolve itself once the days get longer and warmer," von Gal advises. Fescue grass mixes work best on Long Island, since they are shade- and drought-tolerant, requiring less fertilizer. And aerating the soil also helps roots grow stronger.

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Hamptonite and Perfect Earth Project founder Edwina von Gal (RIGHT) promotes natural, pesticide-free lawn maintenance.



Edwina von Gal has been gardening since “everything was organic in the ’70s,” she says, and went into the landscape business in the Hamptons in 1984.

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A healthy lawn will naturally crowd weeds, but another safe way of controlling them is with corn gluten applications, available in the Hamptons at Country Gardens Agway (125 Snake Hollow Road, Bridgehampton, 537-0007; agway.com). As an alternative, native grasses or meadows might be a better choice for some parts of the garden where it’s difficult to maintain a lawn.

Mowing can also affect your lawn’s overall health. “People give their grass a military cut, way too short... leaving it with very little leaf surface for photosynthesis,” says von Gal. This leads to poor root growth, making the grass susceptible to drought. When grass starts to dwindle, owners frequently overwater, which introduces fungus, and then use pesticides and fungicides to keep the lawn from dying. Adding fertilizer that is high in

nitrogen further weakens grass by spurring blade growth without any root support.

Lawns maintained with pesticides also don’t support the insects and birds that eat mosquitoes or the beneficial nematodes that control root-eating grubs, turning them into an unsustainable environment. When we start eliminating links, the cycle doesn’t function.

Von Gal has been gardening since “everything was organic in the ’70s,” she says. When she went into the landscape business in the Hamptons in 1984, she found that clients wanted “perfect, not organic.” Now we are seeing the consequences of breaking the cycle of nature on our own health. According to Duke University’s Nicholas School of the Environment, Americans use 30,000 tons of pesticides annually on their lawns. Of the 30 most commonly used lawn

pesticides, seven are known to cause cancer and 25 are irritants, according to research compiled by Washington, DC-based Beyond Pesticides.

On August 23, Perfect Earth Project will hold its first major fundraising event, The Garden as Art, in collaboration with Guild Hall. Donors will tour toxin-free gardens, followed by a panel discussion with experts, and a “smart bar” with local landscape firms offering chemical-free landscape-care advice. On August 30, the artist Cindy Sherman will hold another fundraiser at her East Hampton home, with live music and a picnic on her toxin-free lawn. “You don’t have to give up your green lawn if you don’t nuke it,” says von Gal. “Creating a landscape is part of a larger living system, not a chemical war zone. Your lawn should be safe for you, your family, and your pets.” perfectearthproject.org **H**