

PRFCT

— PERFECT EARTH PROJECT —



Edwina von Gal in a garden.

Lindsay Morris

The Grass May Be Greener ... **But Is It Safer?**

Story by
BY NANCY KANE

There is no doubt about it: environmental dangers are as close as your own backyard. But renowned landscaper Edwina von Gal is hoping to change all that, one lawn at a time. Thanks to her four-year-old nonprofit organization, Perfect Earth Project, just last month, four East End institutions were deemed “PRFCT,” their gardens and lawns free of toxic, synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. They are the Parrish Art Museum; the Southampton Cultural Center’s Rose Garden, managed by the Southampton Rose Society; the Southampton Arts Center and Southampton Hospital, the first health care facility to earn the designation.

“It was something that we felt was our responsibility and had discussed before. We thought, ‘how

can a health care institution use chemical fertilizers that are known to cause environmental health issues when our mission is to care for the health of the communities we serve?’” said David Lopez, director of facilities and engineering at the hospital. The grounds of the hospital include the volunteer-tended Garden of Hope, honoring patients and community members, as well as garden beds at the entrance of the Ellen Hermanson Breast Center.

Speaking with Ms. von Gal by phone from Perfect Earth Project’s office on Springs-Fireplace Road in East Hampton, it is easy to get swept up in her enthusiasm for what for her has become a mission. The organization’s motto? Transforming landscapes and minds, yard by yard.

“I just realized this was what I had to do,” she said.

“And the timing was amazing. It was 2012 and I had been working with clients [creating landscapes that were toxin-free and healthy for the environment]. I saw that we could do it right with no noticeable change to the beauty of the landscape.”

Ms. von Gal is well known for her creative, organic landscaping for clients such as Calvin Klein, Ina Garten and artist Cindy Sherman and she has been a frequent collaborator with artist/sculptor Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C.

After establishing her landscaping company in 1984 in Manhattan, she started coming to East Hampton in the late ’80s and moved to Sagaponack full time in 1998 where she continued her high-profile work, using environmentally safe substances across the ►

board. By 2002, she had outgrown her cottage/office. By then, there was a growing awareness of toxicity in the landscapes. “People had become very interested in what chemicals they were putting in their yards and gardens,” she said.

And rightly so.

“Conventional landscaping is ‘select what you want and kill everything else,’” she said. “That is not an eco-system.”

An “aha!” moment came in a dentist chair.

“My dentist said, ‘I live by the water and I don’t want to put chemicals on my lawn’ and he asked me where he could find information on non-toxic gardening and I realized there was no resource for this,” Ms. von Gal said. The Perfect Earth Project’s website now has sections such as a glossary, PRFCT Tips and Principles, Lawn Basics and How to Find a PRFCT Professional.

“These chemicals—used for military-cut lawns—harm people and animals and affect our waters too, because of the run-off,” she continued. Her experience had shown her that using non-toxic ingredients could produce the same beautiful results.

“But,” she added, “we are careful to manage expectations for people because if we recommend something that doesn’t work, we set things back.”

The Perfect Earth Project, then, is really a land steward for the community, providing necessary resources and working with people to turn their lawns into safe havens for “people, pets and the planet.”

“When you see those little yellow tags on the lawn ... that means that an area has been sprayed with chemicals,” she said. “Increasingly, landscapers don’t want to handle chemicals. I mean we are not the only voice here. We’re pushing for education for landscapers, to show them, there is another way. We want homeowners to tell their landscapers: go get trained and find a way to do this without chemicals and toxins.”

Wouldn’t it be great if those little yellow signs were changed to “Leif” signs (indicating a PRFCT garden) all over the East End?

“We want to change people’s perceptions, too,” Ms. von Gal continued. “We recommend mowing higher. When your grass is cut too short, the sun hits the soil, the roots get too much sun, and short leaves don’t do photosynthesis, which makes it tougher for beetles to lay eggs. When people mow and throw out what they cut, it’s like throwing all the food out in the trash!”

After the 1950s, said Ms. von Gal, lawns got more and more “precise” and chemicals got more and



At a recent celebration of the Perfect Earth Project launch are, left to right, Edwina von Gal of the Perfect Earth Project; Chris Siefert of the Parrish Art Museum; Amy Kirwin of the Southampton Arts Center; Anja Lofken, a PRFCT homeowner; Elizabeth Kearns of the Southampton Rose Society; and Sharon DiSunno of Southampton Hospital. In front is Ms. von Gal’s grandson, Dylan Sheldon.

Courtesy Perfect Earth Project

more sophisticated. Then there was an upswing in diseases.

According to the website beyondpesticides.org, 17 of 30 common pesticides are probable or possible human carcinogens.

“Pregnant women are the most at risk, as well as children and pets,” said Ms. Von Gal.

Of the 30 pesticides, 11 are linked with birth defects and 19 linked with reproductive effects. Just two years ago, the World Health Organization deemed “glyphosate,” the active ingredient in Roundup, the most used pesticide in the U.S., a “probable” human carcinogen.

Once your lawn is toxin-free, you have to maintain it.

For Southampton Hospital, the decision required some thought.

“It wasn’t hard from a rationale standpoint. It was more difficult from a practical standpoint. I want my facility to look manicured and well maintained and have done so customarily with traditional fertilizers,” said Mr. Lopez. “I did the research and I feel more confident that we will have the same results while being more environmentally responsible.”

The deputy director of the Parrish Art Museum, Chris Siefert, also felt the change was necessary.

“The new home of the Parrish features an expansive meadow of grasses and wildflowers. In evaluating options for maintenance, and in dialog with Edwina von Gal and other individuals and organizations, it

became apparent that utilizing toxin-free techniques are a natural extension of our mission, and will provide beautiful, safe results,” said Mr. Siefert.

“Anyone who says substituting organic for chemical will be more expensive, has to change their practices,” said Ms. von Gal. “Often a lawn that has been treated with pesticides and fertilizers needs a good probiotic. Just like your doctor would recommend to you.”

Ms. von Gal was excited about the hospital coming on board because, as she said, “I really wanted to do a health care facility as a model for the medical profession. We’re building models and we package the information so others can do it too. There’s a handbook on the website; we do classes and we have developed Six Steps on the Path to Perfect. We will work with these public places to keep their lawns and gardens looking great.”

With other PRFCT public places leading by example, including the Village of East Hampton, The Bridge Gardens in Bridgehampton and Madoo Conservancy in Sagaponack, Perfect Earth Project would love to see a world where all gardens grow naturally without pesticides and fertilizers.

“There’s a lot of competition out here about how your lawn looks compared to your neighbor’s, but the narrative should be is my lawn as safe as yours and if it’s not, how it could be,” said Ms. von Gal.

For more information, visit www.perfectearthproject.org.