



American Littoral Society Shore Stewards Fact Sheet – *Countering complaints about your “natural garden”*

What do you do if your neighbors don’t like your “natural garden” practices?

The perfect green lawn is a valued icon on the American scene and any deviation from it (including even the lack of a “deep green” grass color) may cause ire from your neighbors or even a citation from your town. We all like to live in peace and harmony on the one hand, but the “every man’s home is his castle” idea is also there.

A few main reasons neighbors may complain about non-traditional landscaping practices are:

- Your yard doesn’t meet neighborhood “standards” and gives a shabby look to the street. The same effect hanging laundry in your yard may invoke.
- They think property values will be lowered by your handiwork (or lack of it).
- Your yard harbors harmful plants or insects or attracts other unwanted animals.

It is hard to counter the property value thought because, for most of us, our home is our most valuable asset. It is often the case that this argument comes to the surface when there are homes for sale on the street. There also appears to be more tolerance for those who have lived in the neighborhood a long time (they’re just an eccentric old couple).

Here are some suggestions to try to smooth things over:

- Explain the idea behind your landscaping to neighbors when you meet at a coffee klatch or street get-together. People may not realize the value your practices provide to local birds, mammals or butterflies. If possible, explain your plans before they are executed so neighbors aren’t surprised by the changes you make.
- Try not to let your entire property “go wild” but confine it to some localized area, with the rest of your yard being more traditional. Try to keep areas that border neighbor’s property as much like theirs as possible.
- Put up an attractive sign that reads, “Butterfly Garden”, “Wildlife Habitat”, “Animal Sanctuary” ... or some other indication that you “planned” this area for a purpose; it’s not just growing randomly.
- Add a bench or pathway to invite others to partake in the beauty of the area.
- Label some plants so others can learn something as they walk by.
- Invite neighbors to come at a specific time to watch the Monarch Butterflies on their migration, or the hummingbirds feeding, or the nest of crows, or something else that’s special. If you can get them to bring their kids, who may get excited, then half the battle will be over.

- Let neighbors know that you are not adding pests to the street but are attracting things that help eliminate pests.
- Explain that the natural world existed there before the houses were built and you are just giving back a small percentage of the space to the previous inhabitants (this may not carry much weight for those who don't have a high regard for the "previous inhabitants" and don't believe in sharing their space).
- Tell neighbors how much money you have saved on water bills.

If your landscape includes standing water, then the neighbors may complain about mosquitoes. If you attract dragonflies they will eat the mosquito larvae and this may solve the problem. If there are no dragonflies, then there are commercial products you can use to eradicate the mosquitoes (i.e. BT – *Bacillus thuringiensis*). There is no way to convince people that mosquitoes are acceptable.

If you get a citation from your town then you should carefully read the ordinances that you are supposedly violating. If you are growing things in a planned way then you can argue that you are "cultivating" the plants and they are not growing wild. If there is a height restriction on grasses, then perhaps you can do some trimming. Query the town officials in writing as to what accommodations you can make to bring yourself into compliance with the law. They may respond with suggestions that you are willing to accept. There may be an environmental group in your town that can help, or you might find out who has put in local natural gardens and see if they can give you advice. Try the Native Plant Society (www.npsnj.org), Rutgers' Garden (<http://rutgersgardens.rutgers.edu>) or your local cooperative extension office (www.rce.rutgers.edu) to see if any of them can make some suggestions.

If nothing else works then you have the option to fight your case in court, which could be expensive.