

## Wild At Heart

LORRIE OTTO, 88, GREEN ACTIVIST

Lorrie Otto was a leader in pushing Wisconsin to become the first state to ban DDT in 1970. A champion of wildflowers and native plants, she was inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 1999.

When the village [of Bayside] started to spray [DDT] there was an astonishing loss of life. The salamanders disappeared. The grass snakes disappeared. The luna moths disappeared. One morning I picked up a bushel basket of dead robins in just my neighborhood that had died since dawn. Warblers would just fall out of the trees. We used to have so many robins my children learned to count by counting robins. Wrens no longer sang in spring and summertime. We had silent springs.

Suddenly the sewer line came through. Within a year all the lots were sold off, and everything became lawn. The wonderful wild meadows were gone. When I looked around, I thought I had to do something better for my children. I didn't know much about native wildflowers. I just knew destroying habitat was too dull.

I know so many women who have beautifully decorated homes. They have patterned upholstery and Oriental rugs and lovely artwork, and they open the door, and what do they look at? Just a bleak, poisoned lawn.

Suburbia could be so gorgeous. We don't need to go Up North. Just dump leaves all over your lawn in the fall and in the springtime, plant a lot of little trees and watch your woodlands grow up around you. It would be so much fun.

I usually think of communities of [native] plants, rather than a single plant. But if I have to pick, my favorite is the cup plant. There's a beautiful yellow flower. The dew or light rain gathers water around the stem and honey bees line up in a circle and drink from that cup. Goldfinches and chickadees come down, grab the stem and drink the water.

Late July, early August is when the most wildflowers are in bloom. Mine are tall because I want to walk through and not be able to see my neighbor's lawn. The flowers are all around and up around my eyebrows.

— as told to Julia Ann Charpentier