



**This spring,
ECO-SENSITIVE
LANDSCAPING MEETS
LUXURIOUS
OUTDOOR LIVING.**

**More homeowners are opting for
wild meadows over manicured lawns
and gardens for the birds and bees as
much as for the aesthetic.**



Glengate's principal designer and landscape architect, Cheryl Russ, combined "extraordinary beauty and sustainability" for this natural property.



NEIL LANDING

IF

there's anything new in landscaping and gardening this spring, it's us. From a confluence of unlikely factors—climate change, the Covid pandemic, an influx of New Yorkers seeking open space—we've come to view property as a sanctuary from the stresses of living in “interesting times.” We're more appreciative of nature,

more tuned in to the creatures with whom we share the earth, more aware of the human impact on the environment but also of our role, however small, in its welfare.

“For many of my clients, their yard is so much more important to them than it ever was before,” notes Heather O'Neill of Second Nature Landscape Design in Norwalk. “A lot of them weren't coming home until after dark and barely saw their property except on weekends. Now, with a majority of people working either remotely or a hybrid of remote and in the office, they're home a lot more and are taking a real interest in the animal life that comes onto their property and the changing colors of plants as the seasons change.”

Landscape architects and designers from Greenwich to Fairfield report an uptick in homeowners asking for meadows in place of lawns; pollinator pathways to attract birds, bees and small animals; rain gardens and drought- and flood-resistant plantings.

And yet this is Fairfield County, where living well is an art as well as an antidote to modern life. The same landscape architects are designing complete outdoor kitchens with grills, pizza ovens and smokers; outdoor fireplaces and firepits in handsome stone surrounds; infinity pools that cool the body as they soothe the spirit; and garden rooms for observing nature and for peace of mind.

That we can have it all is one of the great benefits of living where we do!

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HOME IS WHERE THE GARDEN GROWS

One benefit of the Covid pandemic has been that it's inspired more residents to take up vegetable gardening, a trend that began in earnest during the recession of 2008 and 2009.

Besides an interest in growing their own produce, people simply enjoy being outdoors and closer to nature.

"So many people were at home and not going away in the summer," says John Carlson of Homefront Farmers in Redding. "That really continued the trend of outdoor living."

For first-time home gardeners, Carlson walks the property with homeowners to identify locations with optimum sunlight.

"You really want six to eight hours to be able to grow the full range of crops," he says. "There are plenty of vegetables that don't require as much sun, but the most popular ones—tomatoes, peppers, squash—need the maximum amount."

Also important is proximity to a source of water (though many of Carlson's clients have

in-ground irrigation systems), plus a relatively level location. "It's easier and less expensive if there's a level spot," he says. "We've built on pretty steep slopes, which require stepping and terracing, but the effect can be beautiful and really dramatic." Homefront Farmers' gardens are raised and fully enclosed in white cedar, which is rot-resistant, and they also have wire netting. The effect is a clean, handsome, structure space, with pebbled walkways among the raised beds for easy access, weeding and harvesting.

This spring, homeowners are hiring professional gardeners like Carlson for gardens that produce serenity as well as produce, with space inside for a small table and a couple of chairs for sitting and relaxing at the end of the day.

Homefront Farmers constructs organic vegetable gardens of all sizes in the optimal spot on clients' properties.



HOMEFRONT FARMERS: CAM GOULD



A rain garden, like this one by Austin Ganim Landscape Design, is often bordered by meadows. This method helps filter pollutants and sediment from rainwater, and more water can soak into the ground.

TOP PHOTO BY AUSTIN GANIM LANDSCAPE DESIGN, LLC; BOTTOM PHOTO BY ALLEGRA ANDERSON

For this project by James Doyle Design Associates, changes in topography were embraced. The ground plane was manipulated to create form and interest, and the earth was cut to create areas for bioretention as well as manage runoff from the driveway.

02

BEFORE THE DELUGE

The prolonged heat wave and drought of last August and September were followed by torrential downpours and flash-flooding, causing damage to gardens as well as to homes and businesses. As large bodies of water, like Long Island Sound, continue to warm, Connecticut meteorologists warn that we're likely to see more weather extremes this spring and summer.

For properties prone to flooding, local landscape architects are creating rain gardens—long, narrow, depressed sections of the

property that are planted with wild grasses and flowering perennials to soak up rain runoff from roofs and downspouts, driveways, patios and the natural slope of the land. Rain gardens filter significant amounts of pollutants and sediments from rainwater runoff, while allowing some 30 percent more water to soak into the ground than a lawn.

"Basically, we contour the land near the source of the most rain runoff in the shape of a bowl or a long, serpentine depression, remove a foot or so of the soil that's there and replace it with a mixture of sand and compost for better percolations," says Eva Chiamulera, a landscape architect with Austin Ganim Landscape Design in Fairfield.

For new owners of a neglected three-acre lot in the Greenfield Hill section of Fairfield, Chiamulera created two large rain gardens bordered by meadows, which are frequent neighbors. She connected the two with a strip of riverbed-like stones and crammed them with pollinator plants that change colors with the seasons and attract successions of birds and insects.

"Beebalm and Eupatorium are in their glory from mid-summer into early autumn and are probably our biggest pollinator attractors," she says. "Insects and birds perceive color differently than we do. Bees prefer mellower bluish-pink and purple-whites and some of the lighter yellows. Butterflies and hummingbirds like the reds and the oranges and brighter pinks and purples—they would've been really comfortable in the 1980s!"

To manage rainwater runoff and pollutants from the driveway of a Greenwich property, meanwhile, James Doyle Design Associates carved a 40'-by-20' rain garden out of the land between the drive and the street. This "bioretention swale," as it's called, also captures pollutants from the runoff and filters them and excess water through a bed of sand and gravel that underlies plants—river birch, for example, and winterberry viburnum—that don't mind getting their feet wet.



James Doyle Design Associates describes this environment of flora and fauna: "Sustainability gives a connection with the natural world, and this safe habitat supports an extreme abundance of local insects, pollinators and wildlife."

03

POLLINATOR PATHWAYS



Among the most popular plantings this season, landscape designers say, are pollinators—flowers, grasses and shrubs that lure bees, butterflies and hummingbirds to pollinate other plants, thereby producing seeds and fruit for us to share with the most important guests: other insects, birds and small mammals.

"I'm getting a lot of calls for a mix of grasses and native pollinator plants that look great but also attract insects and birds and small mammals," says Jay Petrow of Petrow Gardens Landscape Design in Westport. Especially beneficial are goldenrod, echinacea and milkweed, among others, which attract monarch butterflies on their migration route north for the summer.

The interest in pollinator plants and pathways—corridors of native, pesticide-free plants—has led to a greater interest in beekeeping in Fairfield County.

"Pollinator pathways are a wonderful way to attract and help

sustain honeybees," says Rick Glover, a Fairfield beekeeper who manages 65 beehives, lectures widely on bees and beekeeping, and sets up and maintains hives for homeowners in lower Fairfield and Westchester counties.

"The more flowers you plant that open throughout the year," Glover adds, "the more nutrition and health you're bringing to honeybees."

For Cheryl Russ, principal designer and landscape architect at Glengate in Wilton, it is rewarding to work on environmentally friendly projects.

"Every year, we have more and more clients requesting native-plant landscaping, pollinator gardens and meadows—and we are also thrilled to introduce Glengate clients to these concepts," says Russ. "It's a win-win when we can create something that is beneficial to our local ecologies and results in a luxurious setting for family life. The idea that eco-sensitive landscaping is too wild or messy is totally outdated;

it's 100% possible to have both extraordinary beauty and sustainability."

Russ offers some important guidelines to follow when going the natural route:

"Work with designers who are well-versed in selecting the perfect plants for your conditions and wildlife; the company planting your gardens should also be experienced in these types of landscapes—make sure installers are sourcing material that has not been grown with substances harmful to pollinators (such as neonicotinoids). 'Eco' does not mean set it and forget it. Whoever does your property care should know, for example, how and when to mow a meadow, and which kind of plant treatments and fertilizers are safe to use. The right professionals will help you create an incredibly rewarding landscape."

In some instances, local laws require eco-friendly measures to be implemented.

"Given the environmental

sensitivity of many sites and the regulations in place by the local governing authority, buffer zones, rain gardens and the like are frequently mandatory," says Renée Byers, principal of Renée Byers in Greenwich.

Byers, who has seen an increase in clients wanting a more natural landscape, considers multiple factors when designing a project.

"Striking the right balance between beautiful, high-quality design and natural beauty is achieved by collecting all the data, from the owner's program to environmental macro to microclimatic factors, and then taking cues from the surrounding architecture and natural landscape beyond," she says. "It is important to examine the transition points and proportionality between the built landscape and the more wild parts, and to create harmony so the two truly speak to each other. In this way, each appears inevitable and effortlessly linked."

Using native pollinator plants and a mix of grasses, Jay Petrow of Petrow Gardens Landscape Design, creates a meadow that is attractive, yet still appeals to butterflies, birds and small animals.



ALLEGRA ANDERSON

JAY PETROW



After coming across this unspoiled property in Little Compton, Rhode Island, Heather O'Neill of Second Nature Landscape Design used it for inspiration on a local project.



This meadow rendering by Heather O'Neill is for a four-acre landscape in Southport that surrounds an existing apple orchard.

4 THE NO-MOW MOVEMENT

The growing interest in beekeeping coincides, in turn, with a movement away from turf lawns and toward wild, open meadows. Lawns are a relatively recent landscaping phenomenon. It wasn't until after the Civil War that wealthy property owners began planting their yards in grass as a status symbol, mimicking European bowling and putting greens. But while a carpet of Kentucky Bluegrass may be pleasing to the eye and feel good on bare feet, lawns can be detrimental to practically everything else—birds, insects, mammals, the environment at large. Keeping

HEATHER O'NEILL

them green and weed-free demands excessive amounts of water and fertilizer that is toxic to water supplies and to the birds, fish and mammals that consume or come in contact with them. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, turf grass lawns, which cover up to 50 million acres in this country, consume nearly three trillion gallons of water a year and 70 million pounds of pesticides. One influence on the meadow movement has been New Yorkers who moved to Fairfield County during the pandemic. In addition to boosting the residential real estate market, they brought with them an appreciation of meadows from their exposure to the High

HEATHER O'NEILL

Line, the former elevated freight rail line on Manhattan's West Side that has been turned into a 1.45-mile-long public park and walkway through some 150,000 wild and cultivated plants, trees and shrubs. But so have neighbors who, understanding the impact of lawns on the environment, have been replacing sections of it with open meadows. Where once they might have asked for neat, orderly spaces that relied on manicured lawns and boxwood edges, more now prefer wild grasses and perennials that change with the light and with the wind. Enhanced as a result is "the aesthetic value in people's eyes," says Jay Petrow.

"Homeowners call for the ecological benefits of meadows and pollinators, but if they weren't aesthetically pleasing, they wouldn't want them." Adjacent to a swimming pool on a three-acre lot in Stamford, Petrow installed a small area of pollinator plants, then seeded the area with a wildflower mix to create a meadow border that's pleasing to the eye as well as to the birds and the bees. There's more to meadows than meets the eye, though, and much more to maintaining them once they're planted. "It's not just a matter of letting your grass grow or not mowing it," says Heather O'Neill. "Meadows need to be mowed twice a year

so that you don't get big woody plants growing and turning into trees. People think, 'Hey, I don't need to mow my grass—I'll get a meadow.' But what they end up with is something that looks like an empty lot someone hasn't taken care of in a while." For new owners of an old home on four acres in Southport, O'Neill is creating a substantial meadow with plugs of plants as well as seed in and surrounding an existing apple orchard. "The couple wants a natural-looking space that won't require fertilizer or as much mowing as a lawn. They, like others, want to do their part to help the environment without committing their whole property to nature."



When designing a swimming pool and outdoor environments, Shoreline Pools builds something specific for clients based on how they plan to use it on a daily basis.

05

HOLISTIC SWIMMING

Something else transplanted New Yorkers sought in the suburbs during the height of the pandemic were swimming pools, not exactly standard features in Manhattan apartments and condos.

This spring, as in the recent past, local companies are installing pools with more thought to their place in the overall landscape.

For an eco-friendly project with rain gardens, landscape architect Renée Byers designed a pool and spa to complement a scenic riverfront view.

"At this special site along a tidal river, we kept the pool and spa orthogonal with the house and created linear sightlines from key points inside and outside the house to the pool area," says Byers. "We massaged the edges of the planting areas, made of flowing grasses, perennials, trees and shrubs, so that they weave in and out, and are repeated throughout the garden."

In addition to a "buffer zone between the river and swimming pool, the mown lawn was reduced to allow for generous rain gardens," adds Byers. "These

filter stormwater and are an extravaganza for pollinators."

Other factors to consider are how clients plan to use the outdoor space and what kind of pool works with their lifestyle.

"Over the past two to three years we've seen a focus on creating multidimensional outdoor environments," says Dan Koller, chief operations officer at Shoreline Pools in Stamford. "We're now finding people who think about a pool holistically and how they would use it on a day-to-day basis. Is it for swimming laps or more for socializing?"

Accordingly, the design will configure steps and spa to one side for end-to-end swimming and have expanded steps or benches along one side for sitting and talking.

The company is also continuing to see a preference for clean lines and sleek, contemporary design. And there's ongoing interest in automated heating and lighting systems that can be operated from digital devices, vanishing or infinite edges, LED lighting for nighttime swimming, and filtration upgrades for improved water quality.

PHIL NELSON PHOTOGRAPHY



Designed by landscape architect Renée Byers, the swimming pool and separate spa are enveloped in pollinator-friendly plantings, including both natives and ornamentals. Large native Black Tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*) trees were planted to provide shade and enclosure to the garden.

AWARDS FOR THIS DESIGN INCLUDE:

Connecticut American Society of Landscape Architects, Merit Award for Residential Design
 New York American Society of Landscape Architects, Merit Award for Residential Design
athome FC, Winner, Landscape Design for Over One Acre



Interior designer Christina Roughan helped her client achieve a casually elegant style, described as “a perfect mix of Nantucket meets Monaco.”

JANE BEILES



In designing this outdoor kitchen, Renée Byers took cues from the architecture of the home, wrapping the work area in matching stonework, and creating a flowing stair for access.

BACKYARD OASIS

The efforts we've made to create ecologically sensitive yards hasn't taken away from the desire to luxuriate in the great outdoors. Here again, the pandemic only increased the opportunity to do so at home.

"Backyards were where people wanted to be around family and friends," says Tony Aitoro of Aitoro Appliances in Norwalk. "They weren't going out to restaurants as much, and they realized if they had some cool equipment they could cook just as well as the chefs."

Where the company used to sell stand-alone grills, homeowners now want grilling islands that include pizza ovens and smokers, Green Egg

ceramic grills and outdoor kitchens equipped with sinks, garbage disposals, refrigerators and storage cabinets. At the highest end are hand-made, stainless-steel, hybrid gas and wood-burning Kalamazoo grills made for coastal areas like Fairfield County's Gold Coast. They are the centerpiece of grilling islands that can exceed 12 feet in length and cost as much as a quarter of a million dollars.

The surprise is that not a lot of property is needed to create a home resort for living outdoors all summer and into the late fall. For a half-acre lot in Greenwich, for example, James Doyle designed a long, narrow entertaining area with outdoor kitchen, fire pit, pool and outdoor

furnishings—all on one level. When it comes to outdoor kitchens, experts use a discerning eye to achieve the right aesthetic.

According to Renée Byers, "Poorly placed grills and outdoor kitchens mar many promising suburban landscapes." To avoid this issue, Byers recommends creating spaces that complement the home's architectural style and maintain key views.

"We try to marry the kitchen's geometry with the house and terraces, and use materials consistent with those in the rest of the landscape," says Byers. "By their nature, outdoor kitchens are contemporary elements, but by pulling together the right material palette, they can become a timeless element that works even with older homes."

To maximize outdoor entertaining options, interior designer Christina Roughan helped a family of five create a pool and poolhouse ideal for casual gatherings for friends and family of all ages.

"Our clients wanted an outdoor oasis where their children could bring friends, and the adults would enjoy themselves in a space that was nice but not too formal," says Roughan. "One of their friends called it 'a perfect mix of Nantucket meets Monaco.' Wow! What a wonderful compliment!"

WELCOME VISITORS

Homeowners aren't the only ones reaping the fruit of sustainable, high-end outdoor design.

Landscape architects report an increase in the number of honeybees, butterflies, hummingbirds and swarms of beneficial insects in local backyards these days. So are coyotes, bobcats and black bears—all helpful visitors keeping the deer population in check.

More than ever, our sanctuary belongs to our fellow creatures, too. Living in harmony with them, and with family members and friends, will be the real fruit of our labors this planting season.