

TURF WARS

A pair of self-trained horticulturalists help clients rethink their approach to landscape design.

Nicole Fernando

Imagine the corporate campus for a Fortune 500 company surrounded – not with an immaculately manicured lawn – but with wildflowers and natural grass growing wild. Wildflower Farm, a unique landscape design business has helped IBM and Toyota to install exactly this kind of natural environment around their Canadian offices. This commitment to sustainable landscaping sends a strong message about how these organizations are positioning themselves in terms of the environment.

Wildflower Farm was founded in 1988 by a pair of self-trained Toronto-area horticulturalists, husband and wife team Paul Jenkins and Miriam Goldberger. Since then the business has flourished as a dynamic small enterprise providing consulting, landscape design and installation, and selling a wide variety of wildflowers and native grasses from their web site and farm north of Toronto. The non-traditional garden products sold by Wildflower Farm are cost effective and require little maintenance and the balance between aesthetic and environmental appeal is a strong selling proposition.

The company is working with landscape architects and other professionals to evolve a new model of landscape design. Not only does the farm provide a source for wildflowers and native grasses but it is also attracting a growing client base of urban homeowners, corporations and other institutions for its environmental landscaping and consulting service providing ecologically-sound garden design.

Nature's support system

The company was started by Jenkins and Goldberger as a small-scale project that developed out of their love for gardening. But it soon blossomed into Ontario's original "Pick Your Own Flower Farm" with a wildflower nursery and natural gardening centre on site. Despite their lack of formal training, the owners have a strong business sense, innovative marketing skills and a practical knowledge of gardening and landscape design. A key driving force behind the expansion of the business has been the public's growing concern with lawn and garden pesticides and desire to seek out a natural alternative.

The environmental cost of using pesticides and herbicides is becoming increasingly clear and it is leading people to turn away from the conventional manicured lawn and garden.

The visual beauty of wildflowers and rich native grasses is obvious, but there are also numerous environmental and even economic advantages to planting them in urban gardens. Most manicured lawns are sustained by the use of fertilizers and pesticides, which contain chemicals that may contaminate our water and environment. Moreover, today's lawns and gardens are costly to maintain and require, not only toxic chemicals, but also a large consumption of water for irrigation and energy for mowing.

As many as two-thirds of Canadian households use pesticides regularly ... more than 500,000 homes are treated by professional lawn care companies annually and more than one million packages of domestic fertilizer and pesticide combinations for turf are sold to homeowners.¹

The natural landscapes designed and installed by Wildflower Farm require little or no water or mowing. And they have an added bonus: "Wildflowers attract more butterflies and songbirds than hybridized plants," explains Miriam Goldberger. "For thousands of years wildflowers, butterflies and songbirds have evolved together and created a superb support system ... wildflowers provide top quality nutrition to the butterflies and birds... Many herbicides are harmful to good bugs such as bees, ladybugs and butterflies – that help preserve the balance of nature."

A relaxed lawn look

One of Wildflower Farm's most popular products is its drought-tolerant, low maintenance turf grass, branded as the Eco-Lawn. It has been developed from a blend of fescue grasses and it is being marketed as the ultimate low maintenance lawn. It forms a different kind of turf in many differ-

ent soil conditions. The blades are finer and darker and they grow more densely to force out weeds. They also fall to the ground when they reach a height of around ten inches, so no mowing is necessary. "The Eco-Lawn produces a relaxed lawn look, a beautiful aesthetic," says Goldberger.

The popularity of the product is growing with homeowners and professional landscapers. Priced at \$29.95 for a five pound bag (that produces around 1000 square feet of lawn) the Eco-Lawn is selling all over America from the farm's web site and has become a strong driving force for the business. The cost of installing a wildflower meadow or an Eco-Lawn is comparable to planting a traditional landscape and can save the clients of Wildflower Farm significant expenses in annual maintenance costs.

The IBM Software Lab located in Markham, Ontario nurtures the creative talent of its software developers and other employees. IBM incorporated the Eco-Lawn into the landscape design for the facilities to reflect its values and to create an inspirational recreation space surrounding the lab. The Rouge River, which traverses the IBM site, presented a number of development challenges. Working with the Toronto Region Conservation Authority and the Town of Markham, IBM developed a naturalized landscape approach which enhances the valley system. The Eco-Lawn was recommended for its different growing structure and durability. It allowed IBM to promote a more naturalized environment which is a departure from the traditional corporate landscape.

Outdoor Weddings

The environmental landscaping service is an integral part of Wildflower Farm's growing business. The consulting, design and installation services are becoming popular with a variety of consumers including homeowners, corporations, recreational facilities and industrial parks as well as municipalities and regional projects. Planning information for ecological gardening is offered through the business in order to encourage understanding and education in the process. Jenkins and Goldberger are willing to pass on the information they have accumulated through their experience so that the public can become more aware of their gardening and landscape design views.

The Wildflower Farm consulting business is based on incorporating wildflowers and native grasses into landscaping designs to be planted in site-specific areas. The expansion of this side of the business includes the creation of the "Wild at Heart Design Team" which designs flower arrangements for outdoor weddings and special events.

Remaking the Urban Landscape

Consider the process of building a typical universal house. First builders scrape away everything on the site until they reach a bed of clay or undisturbed soil. Several machines then come in and shape the clay to a level surface. Trees are felled, natural flora and fauna are destroyed or frightened away, and the generic mini McMansion or modular home rises with little regard for the natural environment around it - ways the sun might come in to heat the house during the winter, which trees might protect it from wind, heat, and cold, and how soil and water health can be preserved now and in the future. A two-inch carpet of foreign species of grass is placed over the rest of the lot.

The average lawn is an interesting beast: people plant it, then douse it with artificial fertilizers and dangerous pesticides to make it grow and to keep it uniform - all so that they can hack and mow what they encouraged to grow. And woe to the small yellow flower that rears its head!

Rather than being designed around a natural and cultural landscape, most modern urban areas simply grow, as has often been said, like a cancer, spreading more and more of themselves, eradicating the living environment in the process, blanketing the natural landscape with layers of asphalt and concrete.

William McDonough & Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*.

Recently, the staff at the farm has noticed that more people are choosing to host their weddings in a natural wildflower outdoor location rather than a more conventional setting.

Major Projects

Wildflower Farm has designed a series of gardens and meadows for the Toyota Headquarters in Toronto. The positive impact of the project was described in the Toyota North America Environmental Report (Canada) for 2002:

“In the spring of 2002, Toyota Canada Inc. reduced the amount of water it uses on the grounds around its head office by replacing lawns with three gardens of drought-resistant perennials and wild grasses. The new gardens... have eliminated an entire sprinkler zone... they require no fertilizers or pesticides, require mowing only once every 18 months (providing further reductions on gasoline use), and are becoming a source of food and shelter for butterflies and birds. TCI is considering expanding the program to other parts of the head office grounds in the future.”²

Wildflower Farm also plays an active role in York Region's Water for Tomorrow program. As project manager, Michael Brooks explains: “As a partner in the project, they help us educate the public on water efficient gardening and to disseminate information, and free rain gauges to our residents... there are also workshops that are held at the farm...” Wildflower Farm has also been designated by York Region Tourism as an “Ecological Destination Point”.

Other projects include partnering with Durham Region on a number of environmental landscaping projects and working with the Canadian Green Building Council on rooftop garden (green roofs) initiatives. Although a number of these projects are in their early phases, the impact on community development and environmental education is already evident.

The company continues to disseminate public information about its products, services and general tips on ecological gardening in a number of ways. Organizations and corporations have requested public speaking engagements by the Wildflower Farm principals and they have also been featured on television and in newspaper and magazine articles. Miriam Goldberger has spoken at Canada Blooms, the Perennial Plant Association of North America, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Royal Botanical Gardens and to many other

landscaping groups.

New Model

One of the company's strengths is the numerous alliances and synergistic partnerships it has created with other organizations. Companies and communities are beginning to recognize Wildflower Farm as a source of expert knowledge and practical experience. The company's natural landscaping approach has also been featured on The Weather Network, allowing the public to learn more about their practical gardening strategies and the benefits of their signature product, the Eco-Lawn.

Marketing

Savvy marketing, particularly on the company web site, has undoubtedly contributed to Wildflower Farm's growing success and expanded distribution for its products. The web site dispenses extensive online planning information and a selection guide to help customers select species of plants native to their own province or state. And there is plenty of encouragement enticing the amateur gardener to experiment with wildflower seed mixes.

Wildflower Farm is a part of a significant movement working towards a new model for landscape design. The approach is based on natural and simple principles that promote sustainable and ecologically-focused gardening and landscaping with unique aesthetic appeal. ●

Notes

1. Larsen, E. I fought the lawn and... (effects of pesticide use on public health and efforts to restrict usage), *Briarpatch*, July 2001 v30, i6, p. 6.
2. Toyota North America Environmental Report (Canada) 2002, p. 33. Retrieved from <http://www.toyota.ca/>, accessed on July 6th, 2003