KAREN SHERLOCK/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Queen of the prairie

Lorrie Otto's natural landscaping campaign started at her front door, then sprouted nationally

By Jan Uebelherr
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Let's say you're a bird.

You're flying, flying, flying, looking for a good place to build a nest. Where are you going to go?

"Certainly not in one of those shrubs shaped like balls," naturalist Lorrie Otto says, getting laughter from her audience. They fill a school bus parked in a driveway near her Bayside home on a rainy Saturday in August. The occasion is the 22nd annual Lorrie Otto Audubon Wild Yard Tour of naturally landscaped front yards. The first and longest stop is Otto's home.

Otto chats with the group, which has come armed with notebooks, botanical guides, umbrellas. One has a video camera.

"We read that book, 'Requiem for a Lawnmower,'" says one man.

"We have natives – all shade," a woman says, referring to the plants in her garden.

Moments later, Otto is standing in her wet garden on a stone bench given to her in 1996 by the Natural Landscaping Alliance. It's inscribed with words she has used often in talks: "Don't you remember? That's what roadsides once looked like."

The bench is really an award, the first Natural Landscape Award given by the alliance. The 400-pound "sitting rock," made of limestone, now is the Lorrie Otto Award. Miniature replicas are given annually in her name.

An umbrella in one hand and a microphone from the video recorder in the other, Otto looks out at her audience and says, "Isn't this wonderful?"

This is just the way Lorrie Otto likes it – rain or no rain. She is standing in her wild garden, amid drifts of gold and lavender (eight kinds of native sunflowers, cup plant, beebalm, plus goldenrod and ragweed) and a few craggy Scotch pines.

It's clear that her visitors revere her. They are believers.

On another occasion, the Menomonee River chapter of the Wild Ones (a non-profit, native plant educational group) visits Otto's garden.

Otto, an early supporter of the Wild Ones, wears her favorite gardening-talk outfit, a bright-plaid

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KRISTIN PELISEK/PAGE DESIGN

Otto/ 'There's no excuse for shearing and poisoning the Earth'

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kimono, which she'd originally bought for her late son, fastened with a dragonfly pin.

When she moved here 50 years ago with her husband, psychiatrist Owen Otto, this was lawn.

She tried hedges and other things that didn't work, and then let things get wild, plugging in plants acquired from here and there. She tells the Wild Ones how she would spot a plant growing out from under a rural fence, and how she'd stop and ask the farmer who owned the land if she could have some of it. Farmers usually dug it up for her, she says.

And she tells how she did something you might not expect. She cut down trees on her Bayside land.

"I took down four at a time. And it was wonderful to have all those damn spruce trees gone. They belong in Europe."

Otto invites the Wild Ones inside. Her home is small, intimate, lodge-like, with dark wood beams spanning the arched ceiling. To one side of the broad stone fireplace is a single bed made up with a russet spread and throw pillows. It was moved there a few years ago so she could sleep downstairs after she had a hip replaced.

Otto stands on a short stairway that leads to a balcony overlooking the living room. She tells her visitors that this is what it's like to look out onto a flourishing naturally landscaped garden.

And she delights them with stories, including one about a friend's conversion to natural landscaping. The friend was pushing a vacuum in her living room, looked out the window and saw her husband outside going through the same motion, mowing the lawn. "And she said, 'Now, wait a minute. That's Earth out there. We should have plants there,'" Otto says.

Standing in her shaded driveway, the Wild Ones view a patch with a particularly aggressive plant. Someone asks what to do. How can other plants survive?

"You have to say, 'What else is aggressive?'" Then Otto smacks her first into her palm.

"Fight it out," she says.

Lorrie Otto was christened "the

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read poetry together," Otto says.

They both graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison (he had a degree in medicine, she had a degree in related arts – covering a range of artistic disciplines). They married in 1944 in the garden of her parents' home. Mary realized she had to change her name, because there was already a Mary Otto – her sister-in-law. She took a variation of her middle name, Lorraine.

Before her marriage, she learned to fly after seeing an ad for the WASPs (Women's Air Force Service

In a 1984 photo (above), Lorrie Otto stands surrounded by her naturally landscaped garden in Bayside.
Left: In a 1930 family photo, Otto (left) grins with her sister, Betty.

The case was argued before a hearing examiner for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. The issue was whether DDT met the agency's definition of a water pollutant.

The hearings went on for six months, and for the most part, Otto sat and watched.

"When the New York reporters

what she's done, she needs to be tolerant and acceptant of other people," Brandser says.

Not surprisingly, the Professional Lawn Care Association of America in Marietta, Ga., finds many good points to lawns.

"It's really a matter of personal choice," says Tom Delaney, executive vice president of the group, a non-profit national trade association representing about 1,000 lawn-care firms in the United States and Canada.

The majority of Americans have lawns, and there's a reason for that, he says. People like the way they look, they provide ground cover at a minimal price, a place for recreation and, he says, environmental benefits.

"Turf is a great barrier (with roots and thatch) to slow down the movement of dirt and water," he says.

"Wildflowers are nice but when blooms die it's not so pretty," he says. "Just because she (Otto) likes that sort of thing doesn't mean everybody else is going to like it, too."

Naturalist and author David Quammen estimates that Americans spend $25 billion on planting and maintaining turf grass for lawns. America's lawns cover at least 20 million acres, or roughly the same total area as all of Ireland, Quammen writes.

Otto thinks this makes no sense. A lawn does nothing to support life, while a native garden draws birds, butterflies, and bees.

There are other reasons that natural landscaping makes sense to Otto.

"The wildflowers – that's our inheritance. Who knows what Wisconsin should look like? Nobody," she says.

"And then if people believe in a Creator – we don't save his creations? We're destroying them. There's no excuse for shearing and poisoning the Earth."

But then her voice softens and she says: "I can't get angry at people for doing what they do because they're not taught that what they're doing is evil. And they aren't taught that there's another way to do it."

And so she writes about it and lectures, though not as much as

roes." But it would be a mistake – a big mistake – to take this to mean that Otto is at all times gentle. She has an easy, truly joyful laugh, but when it comes to the Earth, she is a ferocious protector, as fierce as a mother.

This is the woman who led the fight to ban the pesticide DDT in Wisconsin. This is the woman who brought a dead bird and a dead bat to a hearing as evidence of DDT's effect on living things.

No, a better name for her might be queen of the prairie, a native wildflower that she has called one of her favorites.

A 'Terribly Shy' Girl

Lorrie Otto wasn't always like this. In fact, she wasn't always Lorrie Otto.

She started life as Mary Stoeber in 1919, the daughter of a Dane County dairy farmer. She says she was "terribly shy."

She guesses that her father, like many farmers, probably wanted a son. He had three daughters. Mary was the oldest.

"I sort of became the son," she says. "I was just his shadow. Loved every minute of it. My dad had such a feeling for soil."

Her childhood was filled with planting and harvesting: Raspberries, strawberries, asparagus, rhubarb.

She remembers crawling into a manger to draw a cow for school. And she loved being up close to that cow. "They have a very sweet, nice-smelling breath."

She was "always joyful," she says, but shy.

"We were Presbyterians, and it was a sin to be proud," she says. "You could never get a compliment."

And she was tall. By the time she was a senior in high school, a teacher thought she'd make a fine Abe Lincoln in a play.

Things worked out so well with the first play that she was offered another, less-demanding part. Her job was to scream when one of the characters put his hands on her waist.

"The man who put his hands on my waist was Owen Otto." A year younger, he was dating her best friend.

Owen Otto decided he wanted to date the girl he made scream in the play, but she would have none of that. She told him that if they ever dated, it would have to be in college. And that's what happened.

He tried to kiss her on their first date. "I gave him such a scolding."

It took him a year of Saturday-night dates to try again. Meanwhile, they fell in love.

"He knew the names of all the stars. He was so smart. We used to

home even proudly flew over her father's neat dairy farm. But the program was shut down before she could become a WASP pilot.

In 1950, the Ottos bought a home in Bayside, with the quiet woods and ravine of Fairy Chasm behind it. They had two children: Patricia, 6, and George, 3. In 1955, Owen Otto was named medical director at Rogers Memorial Hospital in the Town of Summit in Waukesha County.

As the Ottos settled into their Bayside home, Lorrie began to eye the lawn. By 1955, she was converting it to native plantings.

In the process, she took out some spruce trees. They may have belonged in Europe, but many neighbors thought they looked just fine where they were. Many people loved those trees, says Jodi Brandser, who grew up a few houses away and is now Otto's next-door neighbor. Brandser's home borders Otto's sand prairie garden.

Otto put in the sand prairie on her property's north side to show what would grow in this type of soil. Her neighbor at the time was so upset the woman stopped speaking to Otto.

"It was hard at the beginning to understand what her (Lorrie's) goal was," says Brandser. "And her prairie looked nothing like it looks now. It's really matured."

Otto agrees that those were difficult times.

"Oh, they were upset. It was bad," she says.

But in 1960, it was Otto who convinced neighbors that they should not sell off a 20-acre parcel of woods along Fish Creek. The Fairy Chasm property belonged to the neighborhood association. Their private roads needed to be repaired, and bylaws barred special assessments. The directors wanted to sell the land, then use the money to repair the roads.

"I really didn't know why those woods should be destroyed. I hadn't thought that deeply about it, but I had some strong feelings about it anyway. I walked over there and was just blown away by the diversity of life and the different kinds of wildflowers," Otto says.

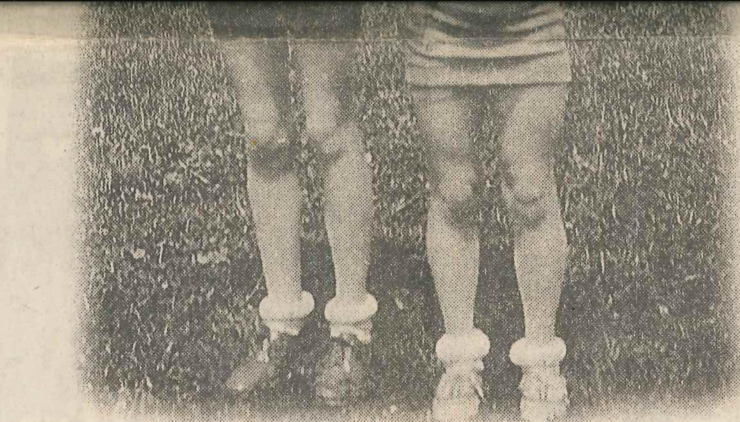
At a meeting, she tried to express why these woods should not be sold, and her shyness struck. Her voice was so high and tremulous that it sounded as if she were about to burst into tears, she says.

"I couldn't control my voice. It was awful, just awful," she says.

She fought that battle by taking photographs of the wildflowers, collecting them in a big album to show to neighbors.

"We got all the votes," she says.

While publicizing that cause,



she conducted nature programs for Boy Scout troops. One of the Scout mothers asked her to talk to the Whitefish Bay Garden Club, and she also was asked by neighbors to do a winter slide program on wildflowers.

Most of the time, she stood in the back of the room running the projector and talking about the wildflowers. "But every once in a while I had to get up and point out something, and then finally I decided 'that's too damn clumsy!' ... I ought to be up there in front where I can really point to things and talk about them. And so, just oh so gradually, that shyness dropped away."

"But I still had it at the DDT hearings in 1969, and so help me, no one knew that I was the big mover behind all this," she says.

Protective of Nature

She had begun to notice the strange behavior of robins in the early '60s.

"That spring, we'd see robins and they would start their convulsions, and they'd quiver, and they'd rest," she says, fluttering her hand on the coffee table in her living room.

"Pretty soon it would get so severe that they couldn't go,...and finally they'd quit," she says.

"And then I remember one day in June my little son came running in. He said, 'Mommy, mommy, the wrens are doing what the robins are doing.'"

She thought it was connected to the spraying that the village was doing.

"Every Thursday night, a big truck went by and fogged the whole place," she says. "And we'd race around and close all the windows."

First they sprayed for mosquitoes.

"Then, the elm trees started dying and they sprayed them from the ground at first. And then we had a helicopter that sprayed over it," she says.

She urged the village to stop.

"I'd go to the village and they'd say, 'Well, Mrs. Otto, what do you want? Birds or trees?' And then they said, 'Everybody is doing it. What difference will it make if just the Village of Bayside doesn't do it?' Or they'd say, 'Mrs. Otto, it's so cheap, and it's very effective.'"

Reminded of a newspaper account of her taking a dead bird and a dead bat out of her purse and depositing them on a hearing table, she says: "I don't remember the individual bat and the bird. ... I did so many things in those 10 years."

She does remember heading off to the village with evidence: A bushel of dead birds.

"I was so upset I just got in my car and I drove around and I took the robins that were right at the end of their convulsions or had just died," she says. "And I had three-quarters of a bushel basket full of robins.

"And I took it over to the village manager and I was just going to throw them at him. And then I thought, 'Oh God, I'll get in the paper doing this.' I was married to a psychiatrist who never wanted anyone to know where his home was."

A turning point came at a Wisconsin Department of Agriculture committee meeting. After they voted to allow municipalities to continue to spray, she told committee member Joe Hickey, a UW-Madison wildlife biologist concerned about DDT use, there was only one thing left to do: Sue.

Otto contacted the Environmental Defense Fund. Its lead scientist and attorney had gotten national coverage in a failed challenge of DDT in Michigan. Otto told them that Citizens Natural Resources Association of Wisconsin, a group she had helped found, would sponsor the defense fund if it carried the fight into Wisconsin.

Her group would raise funds. And Otto would make sure the scientists in the case had places to stay, to eat, to meet.

"All the scientists met in this room, from all over the world. I mean, this big scientific vessel was all put together in this living room," she says during an interview in her home.

one caught me I'd say, 'No, no, no, talk to the scientists.'"

In the end, the issue was decided when the state legislature passed a bill banning DDT in early 1969, shortly after the hearings had adjourned.

Her daughter, Patricia, an obstetrician and gynecologist in Washington state who also is known for her work with bats and wood ducks, doesn't recall much about the DDT hearings because she was "consumed by medical school."

But she does feel that her mother "blossomed" at about this time.

"That episode really did set her up. That got her on the road to activism, seeing that speaking out makes a difference," Patricia Otto says.

"She is my best friend," Patricia says . "All this has certainly inspired me."

Lorrie Otto and her husband divorced in the mid-1980s after 40 years of marriage. The hearings were not a factor, she says, adding that she and her husband had grown apart. He died in 1995 of cancer.

Their son, George, cared for his dying father. He had been a medic in the Vietnam War and had worked for 22 years managing the grounds at Rogers Memorial Hospital. He died in 1996 at age 47 in his Colorado home after a fall in his bathroom.

Lawns 'Are Evil'

After the DDT hearings, Lorrie Otto took a one-year course to become a teacher-naturalist teaching children at the Riveredge Nature Center in Newburg.

"I said, I don't want to teach children at all. If the adults don't start taking better care of the world," – and here she gasps – "there isn't going to be anything left for these children when they grow up," she says.

Ever since, Otto has been trying to stamp out part of the American dream: The lawn.

"I think they're evil. If they're so large that you cannot use just a little hand-push lawn mower, then I truly think they are evil. Really evil. I think it is immoral for us to shave the Earth and landscape property," she says.

Of course, not everyone agrees with Otto's assessment of the American lawn. Jodi Brandser would like to let her yard get a little wilder, but keeps a lawn because her children play on it. She finds it difficult to see how they'd play in the same way among tall prairie plants.

"I think that just as people have been tolerant and acceptant of

essays.

"I'm 80 years old and I don't know how to type!" she says. She's taking a computer keyboard class at the nearby MATC Mequon campus.

At the suggestion of the Schlitz Audubon Center, which is near her home, Otto began giving tours of naturally landscaped front yards, including her own. Held the first Saturday of August since the 1977, the tour was recently renamed for her.

She also has fought to challenge municipal weed laws.

"Those are conformity laws," Otto says. "They want everybody to have a lawn."

In 1975, she got involved in a case involving Donald Hagar of New Berlin, who was ordered to cut his long grass. A judge declared the New Berlin weed ordinance unconstitutional.

Otto and her garden have been featured in numerous garden books, Tom Brokaw has featured her on the "NBC Nightly News," and she has received numerous awards for her work as a naturalist. She's especially proud of being named to the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, joining naturalist Aldo Leopold.

And, in 1997, the National Wildlife Federation gave her the National Conservation Special Achievement Award.

Mark Wexler, editor of National Wildlife magazine, says Lorrie Otto is a real pioneer.

"In the 1950s she was planting native species in her yard, which was way ahead of the curve," Wexler says. "There may not be anybody else in the country who has done as much as her to bring the idea of natural landscaping to the public's view."

Otto also keeps an eye on pesticide use around her. She's on a statewide pesticide alert call list. It requires anyone spraying pesticides to call people on the list who live in the area where the spraying is to be done. And she spends lots of time in her garden, sometimes enlisting local kids to help out.

"If the kids find something neat in the ravine, the first person they want to run and show it to is Lorrie," Brandser says.

Otto says she spends much of her day outside. "I don't even go grocery shopping during the daytime. I just think it's so beautiful here," she says.

She is standing in her garden saying this when she spies a truck with a spray tank.

She walks up to the truck.

"Hi, I'm Lorrie Otto," she says. "What are you spraying?"

"Weed killer," says the young man at the wheel. "Down the road..."