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What Happens When Wildness Meets Main Street?

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I recently had the pleasure of leading almost 40 people on a tour of seven regional meadows. The meadows were in full flower, each lively with color—and filled with insect and bird life. Each was stunningly pretty in a wild way.

It is noteworthy, however, that each of the meadows grew apart from neighborhoods. Three were on the grounds of Connecticut College in New London. Two were at Harkness State Park. Two were tucked away behind private homes in Chester and Killingworth.

What if this tall vegetation were in a city neighborhood or along the streets of a modern housing development? Ordinances in some regional towns would define these plants as blight.

To be sure, blight ordinances are intended to protect the community from sidewalk obstructions and rusty refrigerators in front yards. They also aim to prevent loss of perceived value for the surrounding properties.

But when New London delivered a complaint to a homeowner who naturalized her yard to reduce mowing and improve habitat for birds and insects, an editorial in The Day newspaper(Aug. 24, "Plant-based blight?") asked: Is unmowed vegetation the same kind of blight as a stripped-down car or broken windows?

Blight ordinances have made the regional news a lot lately. Both East Lyme and Preston adopted ordinances in the past two years. In 2017, Westbrook voters considered an ordinance, but it didn't pass. Old Lyme is currently considering the addition of an ordinance.

Some towns have no blight ordinance, including Essex and Westbrook. Some towns have blight ordinances, but they don't mention vegetation, as in Stonington. Other towns have blight ordinances that specifically address vegetation but in a variety of ways. Here are some examples:

• East Haven specifically includes "ragweed, poison ivy, poison sumac, poison oak, and similar plants" in the blight category. The East Haven ordinance requires lawns be kept under six inches.

• Old Saybrook and Madison both exclude areas maintained in their "original naturally wooded, field, or shoreline state."

• Old Saybrook's ordinance specifically excludes landscaping "intended as a substitute or replacement for traditional lawn grass."

• East Lyme's ordinance excludes "maintained gardens, flower beds, and xeriscape landscaping." ("Xeriscape" refers to landscapes with low water needs.)

Ordinances do not enforce themselves, of course, and disputes such as these often come down to the opinions of individuals. While one homeowner reads books such as Bringing Nature Home, Planting in a Post-Wild World, and Garden Revolution (see related sidebar), another homeowner might pick up the phone to complain about tall plants and un-mowed turf. To the complainant, wildness may violate their beliefs

about cultural norms or neighborhood safety—whether the plants are true weeds or the most valuable insect habitat around.

Some who study public attitudes toward landscapes and horticulture have identified a phenomenon called "plant blindness," the inability to see the plants for what they are or understand their roles. For instance, most people can't distinguish ragweed (weed) from goldenrod (highly beneficial pollinator plant), or mugwort (weed) from chrysanthemums (ornamental plant). This problem vexes many members of the land-based professions, as well as volunteers in parks and on school grounds whose plantings are routinely mowed and trampled by grounds crews as well as unknowing members of the public.

Given all the discussion about pollinators, climate resilience, clean air, and clean water, the split perception of plants as problems and plants as benefactors is not likely to go away soon. Collectively, we need to come to a new understanding of how urban landscapes impact the quality of life for all citizens and creatures, too.

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