

Guest Essay

# One Way to Do More for the Environment: Do Less With Your Yard

May 16, 2022, 5:00 a.m. ET



A monarch caterpillar feasts on the leaves of a milkweed plant in the author's meadow. Credit... William DeShazer for The New York Times

By Margaret Renkl

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

NASHVILLE — When I mention the new meadow I am cultivating where our front yard used to be, my adult children roll their eyes. The word “meadow” conjures the mental image of a sunny field of blooming wildflowers, but this one is a work in progress. A dream more than an actuality.

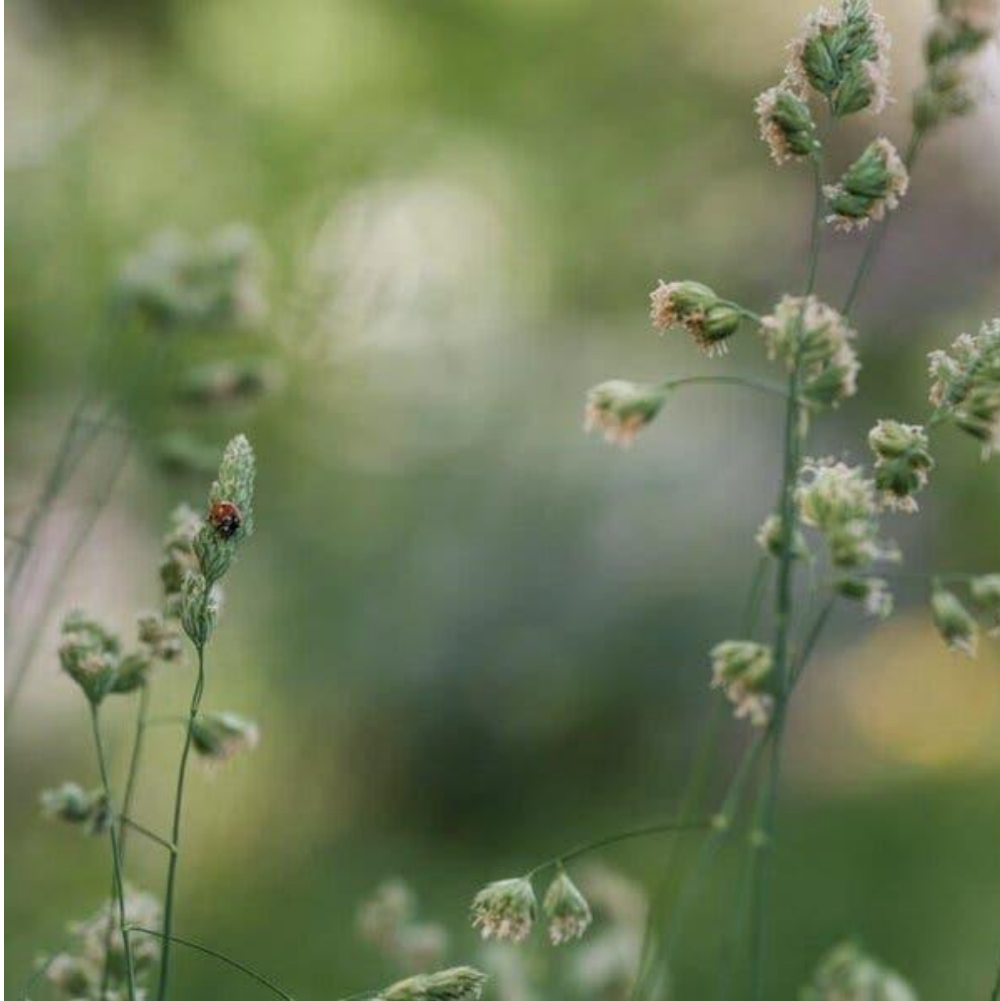
The new meadow where our front yard used to be is mainly white clover, chickweed and grass gone to seed, though there are also patches of low-growing violets, which I love, and creeping Charlie, which I do not. (An invasive species, creeping Charlie is the bane of the natural yard.)

But already there are also some lovely clumps of fleabane — small daisylike flowers on knee-high stems — that look very much like the romantic fields brought to mind by the word “meadow.” Soon there will be other flowers, too. Perhaps not this year but certainly the next, and there will be even more the year after that.

This is not a statement of faith but of fact. Every year we let more patches of our yard go wild, and every year more flowers appear in the uncut areas. First came pokeweed and butterweed in the backyard, then white snakeroot and Carolina elephant’s foot in the side yard. Last year we had frost asters for the first time.

May is Garden for Wildlife Month, according to the National Wildlife Federation, but gardening doesn’t necessarily mean planting. It can also mean giving the volunteer flowers a permanent home. Because where there are wildflowers, there will be insects. And where there are insects, there will be birds and bats and tree frogs and many other creatures who rely on the protein insects provide.

Many eco-gardeners do this kind of re-wilding, as the movement is called, in an intentional way, killing off the turf grass and eradicating the invasives before replanting with native flowers and grasses. It’s the micro version of large-scale conservation efforts to restore ecosystems, preserve biodiversity and mitigate the damage caused by climate change. Perhaps the most famous example of re-wilding is the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone National Park.



A ladybug sits upon wild grass. Credit... William DeShazer for The New York Times



A broad-head skink peeks out of brown leaf litter. Credit...William DeShazer for The New York Times

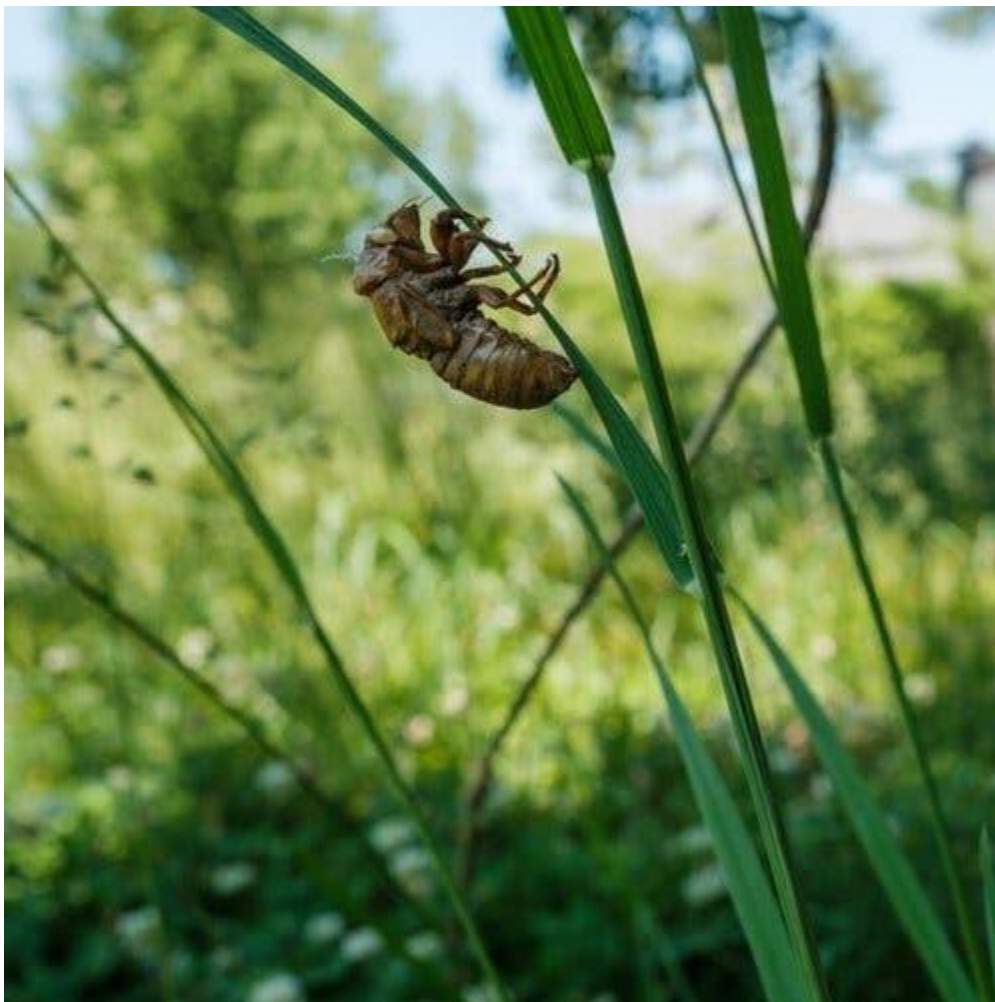
My own life, not to mention my very self, isn't set up to manage a re-wilding project from conception to pristine reality, even on our half-acre lot. But unlike the pollinator garden I've been cultivating for years, the meadow where our yard used to be started itself. True, our first stem of goldenrod is one I transplanted last year from a friend's property outside town, and I started the frostweed and ironweed and anise hyssop from seeds passed along by fellow native-yard enthusiasts. But everything else arrived on its own: white avens, wingstem, rattlesnake master, plus three new varieties of goldenrod and some other new plants that I won't be able to identify until I see them in bloom.

The flowers arrive on their own because nature, true to rumors, abhors a vacuum, and our yard provides several vacuums. We don't use chemical fertilizers, and we don't use insecticides or herbicides. We also have a resident mole who turns up little piles of loose soil all over the yard every fall, creating the perfect landing spots for seeds carried on the wind or by visiting wildlife. All of which is why the wildflowers just started showing up.

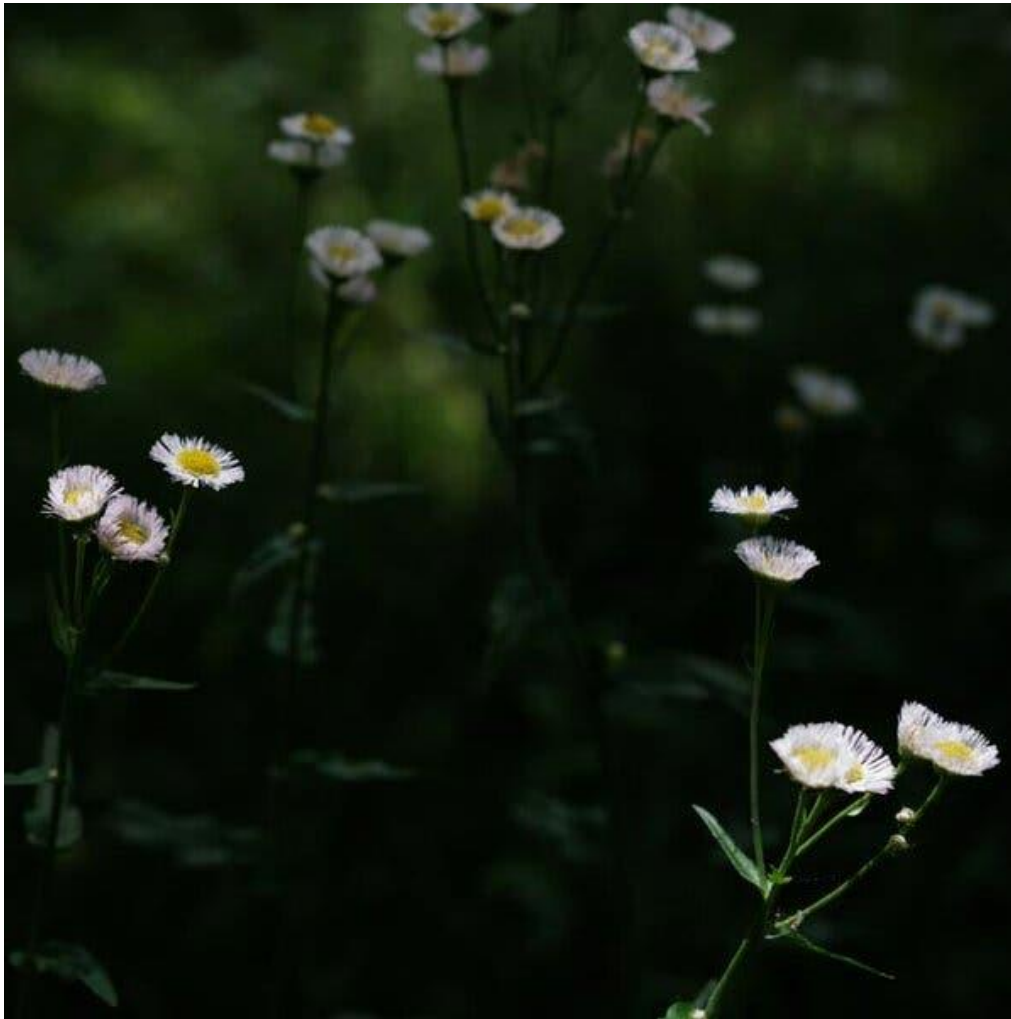
For years, we mowed it all into a conventional yard after spring's first wild profusion of flowers was over. Then I read Douglas W. Tallamy's 2007 book "Bringing Nature Home" and learned how much more we could be doing beyond tolerating moles and keeping the yard poison-free. We started planting native trees, flowers and shrubs, too, understanding that native wildlife needs native plants to eat. We started letting leaves and deadwood lie to feed and shelter insects. And we let the unused parts of the yard grow up.

Unlike the plants in my pollinator garden, which must be kept clear of the choking creeping Charlie, the plants in our self-populating meadow require almost no tending. I go in there from time to time with a weed wrench to pry out the bush honeysuckle and privet seedlings, the most invasive of all the unwelcome plants that have a foothold in this yard. But I don't bother with anything else that doesn't belong.

A native-plant purist would root out all the nonnative plants, but I am not a purist about much of anything. I do feel a twinge a guilt sometimes about everything I know I could be doing if I had more time, or more space, or more money. But mostly I don't believe guilt has a place in this conversation.



A cicada shell rests on a leaf.Credit...William DeShazer for The New York Times



Some lovely clumps of fleabane. Credit... William DeShazer for The New York Times

I wonder if more people don't try to do better by the environment because they think doing better is too hard, too impractical, too expensive. In truth, you can make a difference with an effort as small as planting milkweed in a pot on a city balcony to provide food for monarch butterfly caterpillars. Making a difference can be as easy as learning to love clover and dandelions. It can be as simple as joining the No Mow May movement, a British initiative rapidly spreading across the United States, or the Garden Club of America's Great Healthy Yard Project.

In this deeply red region of the country, it's not always evident that more Americans are embracing eco-friendly lawns and gardens, as a recent story by PBS NewsHour noted, but I think I might be seeing the first stirrings of change even here. Last fall a plumber looked at the holly hedge beside our broken faucet and said, "You know, you used to see bumblebees just *covering* bushes like this in the springtime, and now you don't see them things at all anymore." Noticing and feeling deeply the loss of the bumblebees isn't the same thing as skipping the pesticides, I know, but surely it's an important first step. Maybe that's why I've begun to see a carpet of blooming clover in front of more and more houses near mine.

I follow Mr. Tallamy's movement, Homegrown National Park, on Instagram, and I am heartened to see it spreading like creeping Charlie, one yard at a time. This crucial program aims to turn a volunteer network of private land into a haven for biodiversity that rivals the entire national park system. "It is the largest cooperative conservation project ever conceived or attempted," according to the program's website.

Unlike so many other questions of environmental stewardship, gardening for nature does not require taking a political position. Unless you live in an area of extreme drought, or in another environmentally sensitive place, what you think a yard *should* look like, or which flowers are welcomed there, is mostly a matter of taste. Tuning our own preferences to what our wild neighbors desperately need should be an easy switch.

You aren't obliged to turn your yard into a meadow. All you need to do is stop spraying for weeds. Stop spraying for insects. Leave a little brush pile in the corner of the yard, if you can, and let the weedy flowers grow up along the fence line. When you're choosing new trees and shrubs, or even just window-box flowers, take a moment to look up the native options that are just as pretty as the nonnative ones now in style. If you can set up a nest box for birds, and keep clean water available for all the thirsty creatures, that will help, too.

You needn't do it all, and certainly you needn't do it all at once. But if you do even one of these things, the natural world will reward you so profusely with butterflies and bees and bright-winged songbirds that I bet you'll decide it's only the first step.