

SALT meets Wild Ones

by Kathy T. Dame

On June 6th of 1997 at a Connecticut College Arboretum gathering, Dr. William A. Niering*, Professor of Botany at the College, announced his latest initiative—the SALT movement—which he hoped would spread nationwide. SALT is an acronym for Smaller American Lawns Today, and is aimed at reversing the lawn mania in America. In his lecture that evening entitled “Environmentally Designing Your Lawn,” Dr. Niering set forth some of the principles involved in the new movement. Americans, he said, could become the “salt of the earth” by cutting back on the size of their lawns, and having home grounds that are in harmony with nature.

Why re-design the American lawn? There are a myriad of reasons. Cutting back on the size of the lawn means cutting back on the use of pesticides. Pesticides not only can be harmful to people and their pets, but also can destroy species diversity and create monocultures, going against nature’s own tendency towards biodiversity. The use of synthetic fertilizers used on the typical American lawn can also pose real problems since fertilized lawns have far more nitrogen runoff than non-fertilized lawns. Runoff is a serious pollution problem for wetlands and aquatic systems. All power equipment, especially riding mowers, are fossil-fuel demanding, and they require more energy in their initial construction, maintenance, and operation than hand operated reel mowers, not to mention the high level of air pollution they generate. Dr. Niering felt that even the noise pollution from using a power mower was an insult that neighbors should not have to tolerate, not to mention the fact that a reel mower is excellent for the cardiac and skeletal systems. Furthermore, why waste time mowing a large lawn when you could be enjoying other activities? These are just a few of the reasons that people should cut back on the size of their lawns, according to Dr. Niering.

Niering also gave tips to the audience on how to achieve these goals. Setting aside an area of the lawn for planting shrubs and trees will begin to decrease the size of the lawn and will also attract wildlife. By planting native plants such as virburnum, bayberry, shadbush or other natives, eventually the grass will be shaded out. In the meantime, the homeowner can continue to mow around the plantings, add leaves or wood chips to smother the grass, or begin to plant ground covers. Niering suggested that homeowners convert a portion of their current lawn to a meadow by simply not mowing it. It is amazing the diversity of plants that are just sitting there waiting to flower, especially if the owner has not been using weed killers or fertilizers. Colorful native perennials can be added to the meadow. And every piece of property should have a vegetable garden and a small orchard with fruit trees. Oh, the joy of growing fresh fruits and vegetables right on your own home ground! Perennial and annual flower borders lend diversity and require much less maintenance than lawns. Ground covers are a must, especially on steep slopes where mowing is difficult. Evergreen ground covers are especially attractive throughout the year. And how about a solar clothes dryer to help save energy and take advantage of the sun! Plant the borders of the property with trees and shrubs which will give the homeowner greater privacy and permit the naturalistic landscaping to develop with minimal

interference from neighbors. Above all, keep the front of the property and paths mowed so that your yard will not be considered simply unkempt!

The concept of naturalistic landscaping was far from new to Bill Niering! *Energy Conservation on the Home Grounds: The Role of Naturalistic Landscaping* written by Niering was published by the Connecticut College Arboretum in 1976. At this point in 1997, however, he felt urgently compelled to bring it to the American homeowners and to provide them with suggestions to help them begin to make the transition toward more ecologically sound home grounds. SALT was an immediate hit with homeowners, many of whom wanted to get started on this transition. As word of SALT spread, people throughout the country called or wrote to the Arboretum expressing interest and wanting to “join SALT.” Unfortunately, there was and is no formal SALT membership. Enter Wild Ones!



By that time, I was somewhat familiar with Wild Ones and had contemplated starting a Connecticut Chapter for several years, but time and circumstances had not allowed me to do so. Small wonder that I was excited about Wild Ones as it promotes the same concepts of naturalistic landscaping that the Arboretum does, and which now were the focus of the SALT movement. My own yard was a Wild Ones/SALT paradise! Frustration grew as requests to join SALT continued to grow. The Arboretum began to offer SALT related programs, visited lawns that lived up to the SALT code, and began sending out “Fact Sheets” to those who had expressed a specific interest in the movement. In 1999, everything came to halt with the sudden death of Dr. Niering.

Interest in the SALT movement, however, did not die with Dr. Niering. In November of 2002, “Let’s Go Natural,” the first annual SALT seminar was born, and continues to thrive. In 2006, Donna VanBuecken, knowing that I had a keen interest in starting a Wild Ones Chapter in Connecticut, told me that Nancy Livensparger from Wild Ones in Ohio had moved to our state. Nancy and I met and began planning for our public announcement of the first meeting of Wild Ones in Connecticut, now proudly known as the Connecticut Mountain Laurel Chapter of Wild Ones. The area was ripe and the ground was fertile for the new chapter, and many people with an interest in SALT joined forces with our newly formed chapter. Earth Day and the SALT seminar are two times when the two groups walk hand in hand. Recently our Wild Ones Chapter adopted the Arboretum’s Native Wildflower Garden as a community project. While the Arboretum itself must focus its attention on many aspects of the natural world, Wild Ones is an exciting and well developed movement which provides not only membership, but also a forum for members to share information and solve problems regarding their individual home grounds. The Mountain Laurel Chapter is also a group to whom the public can get help with their own yards.

In many respects, Dr. Niering’s dream that the SALT movement be spread throughout the country, has been fulfilled through SALT’s partnership with Wild Ones. SALT/Wild

Ones are quite frequently mentioned together in local papers and beyond. Recently one of our Wild Ones member's yard was featured on the front page of a local paper, and Wild Ones and SALT have been mentioned in *The New Yorker* magazine. By joining together with other likeminded homeowners, Americans can, and will, have biodiverse lawns that are in harmony with nature.

*Dr. William A. Niering was not only a beloved teacher and colleague at Connecticut College, but was also an internationally renowned environmentalist. He was not an armchair environmentalist, but rather walked the walk in every aspect of his life. His career and accomplishments were very much linked with the Arboretum, and he served as the Arboretum Director from 1965 to 1988, Research Director of the Arboretum, Director of the Center for Conservation Biology and Environmental Studies at the college, and held numerous other positions of esteem in addition to his role as a Professor of Botany. He related to people in all walks of life. He was the author of several books and wrote scores of professional publications. He received citations in "Who's Who in the East," "American Men of Science," "Men of Achievement," "Personalities of the Americans," "Who's Who in Science and Engineering," "Who's Who in Environmental Registry," and "Who's Who in American Education."

"By becoming an environmental model in energy conservation, recycling, and preserving biodiversity, we mimic those self-perpetuating natural ecosystems—forests, meadows, and wetlands—that have survived for many thousands of years." -William A. Niering