

FRAN & WILL PRICE: SUSTAINABLE YARD VISIONARIES

If Shakespeare were promoting sustainable landscaping in Princeton, he might begin by asking, “How dost thou gaze upon the dandelion?” And it would be a good start to a larger discussion – one that Fran Price, Princeton resident and passionate sustainable caretaker of her own small yard, believes we need to have if we are to preserve and nurture our local ecosystem.

“We need to change our mindset about plants like the dandelion,” she says. “Is it a weed or food? Dandelions have an important role to play in our ecosystem. Though not native, they provide a good source of nutrition for birds and pollinators early in the spring when food is still relatively scarce. By contrast, manicured lawns provide very little nutrition for most wildlife.”

Just three years into establishing a sustainable yard on their one-eighth of an acre, Fran says she and husband Will are still in the beginning stages. It takes time, patience, and a certain tolerance for disorder, she explains.

“It’s a different aesthetic. Things will not always look perfect, and your neighbors may raise an eyebrow now and then, but the bugs and birds will appreciate it. Birds love flowers after they go to seed, and we love watching the whole process and seeing the diversity of pollinators we attract. They call it ‘rewilding’ in the UK, which is a great term for it. When you let even small patches of your yard grow wild, you would be amazed at what kinds of insects, birds and mammals come back.”

Fran and Will’s yard is a mix of raised flower and vegetable beds, a few trees, some shrubs, and a small meadow that Will has been seeding with wildflowers and typically mows once a year. They grow grapes near the front porch, in addition to blueberries and blackberries, all mostly for the birds.

Thinking of converting a section of your lawn to meadow this summer? Fran has a tip for those starting out. To first clear the area of grass and unwanted plants, put down a few layers of cardboard and top it off with six inches of soil. You can plant in the soil, the cardboard will decompose, and the grass will die off. It’s less labor intensive than rototilling and better for the environment than using chemicals to kill the grass.



above: Will and Fran Price’s front yard meadow in Princeton, NJ

“We did some rototilling to establish our meadow,” Fran admits, “but in hindsight, I would have used the method described above.”

With the time saved, and free from the din of leaf blowers and mowers, you just might find yourself sitting in the yard more often, listening to the sounds of nature, and contemplating a few Shakespearean sonnets.

(Fran & Will Price bring a passion for sustainability to all aspects of their lives. In addition to their yard, their house is completely sustainable. They met in graduate school and have spent their careers protecting and improving forests around the world – he currently as President of the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, and she as an 18-year veteran of The Nature Conservancy and, more recently, as Global Forest Lead at World Wildlife Fund International.)