

WILD EYE

January/February 2026

A Wild Yard Christmas Card

by Nancy Bain

On November 10, 2025, Christmas came early for me with a dusting of snow. Snow! It's a creative force that gets us outside and gives us a chance to experience the world differently. Thus, as I looked out the window, the gentle, sparkly covering of snowfall on my wild yard impelled me to seize the moment to take some snapshots.

Grabbing my iPhone, I dashed into the street to snap pictures of the front yard. Reviewing each image, I was stunned by the camera's capacity to convey wildness. This little machine captured colors, patterns, and shapes and put it all into a layout that made me—devoid of any artistic ability at all—gasp. It showed my woodsy, snowy yard as a contrasting foreground to my small, formal-looking house. The yard's wildness—the leafy shrubs, short trees, towering trees, boulders here and there, clumps of still standing native plants—were perfectly unified. Whodda thunk a wooded area that usually sticks out like a sore thumb amidst a neighborhood of militaristic turf lawns could be so lovely to see? Heck, I thought, this is Christmas-card worthy!

In the early aughts, when I began working on my yard (my husband and I had bought the house in 1998 as a retirement project), I was beginning to better understand how current yard-keeping values served mainly to obliterate existing wildness. Our rear property abuts a woodland, and my aim has always been to connect that woodsiness with the front yard. I recall William Cronon's 1995 essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in which he argued that over the centuries we've been programmed to think of true nature as sacred—a remote, faraway place uncontaminated by civilization.

Yet, as we think about it, real wilderness has often been considered a terrifying place. In the Bible, Jesus finds danger in the wilderness when he runs into Beelzebub, a prototype charlatan ready to snare victims and draw them into his depravity. In the wilderness of the New World, colonists faced wolves, bears, snakes, famine, cold, fatal illnesses, utter loneliness, and isolation. So, it's understandable that human beings strive to domesticate wild places; it's simply a survival instinct.

On the other hand, as the onslaught of domestication decimates biodiversity, a different kind of wilderness raises its ugly head—one that challenges human existence. Ah, but we have voices in our modern wilderness compelling us to conserve Wild America. As Cronon pointed out, rather than yearn for pristine wilderness, we should make room for

wildness everywhere—in the city, along the highways, in our own backyards. Thoreau said as much. We hear these pleas in Aldo Leopold’s concept of a “conservation ethic”; in E.O. Wilson bidding us to deepen our biophilic character; in Lorrie Otto’s mandate to “keep the water on the land”; and, of course, in Douglas Tallamy’s invitation to bring nature home—to create wildness in all of our communities as part of one large Homegrown National Park.

For more than two decades, I’ve been planting native species in my yard. For that, the city has tagged me four times for landscaping violations. (Each time it’s a newly hired code enforcement officer.) The claim is always “noxious weeds”! But each time I’ve been able to convey to the city the values of conservation that my yard represents and the importance of what I do. And as a Wild One, I must keep at it. Sometimes it’s two steps forward and one step back. Sometimes it’s two steps forward, then three slides back.

But that’s the way it works. Being cited for landscape violations may bring out feelings of anger, shame, or defensiveness. Alternatively, citations may be taken as opportunities to engage in democratic processes, such as civil discourse and collaboration—values that lie at the center of environmentalism and conservation. Although the general public may not see what a Wild One sees, through education and perseverance, many will begin to understand.

This fall, as I was working in my yard to ensure it would pass muster with the current zoning officer (it did), a passerby waved at me to ask about the staghorn sumac that was still sporting its beautifully colored leaves. I invited him up to inspect the softness of the “horns” and told him how a tea can be made from the tree and other little stories. As he turned to continue his walk, he said, “I’ve always wondered about your yard.” And I smiled. Isn’t that the great thing about a wild yard? To inspire wonder? Socrates said, “Wisdom begins in wonder.” And that’s exactly what I’ll inscribe in my 2026 Christmas card that features that photo of my wild yard.