

WILD EYE

November 2025

## What Does Wild Mean?

by Nancy Bain

Modern times inure us to manufactured outdoor environments. In our neighborhoods we are surrounded by neat-and-tidy landscapes (especially preferred by the well-to-do): plush-carpet lawns, orderly specimen trees, boxwood hedges clamped around house foundations, mulches thickly layered, and beds and borders edged with knife-like precision. These constructed yards shout out to everyone that life here is in control. And in that vein, we respond positively. We feel many things, but probably mostly we feel that we're safe from unruly and pestilent wild things.

But what's not to like about wild things? Why do organizations such as Wild Ones exist? Since its 1977 founding, beginning with a few chapters, Wild Ones has grown to 125 chapters across 36 states. So apparently the 11,000 memberships that support Wild Ones both like and love wild things. It's a worthy vision. And when we hear reports about the decline of biodiversity, which most of us environmentalists take to mean a loss of wild things, we dig in to spread our belief that life is better with wildness.

And there's the rub. First, we've come to our way of life by keeping wild things out. Second, there's no agreed on the meaning of "wild" nor scientific concurrence on what biodiversity is. Plus, the dictionary defines "wild" with mainly negative references. Yet, ultimately, our beloved Thoreau eclipsed all that by giving us the most important aspect of the word when he wrote "in Wildness is the preservation of the World."

And it's important to grasp these perplexities. For example, decades ago, I saw a neighbor "volcano mulching" her curb-lawn trees. In my environmental work, I'd learned that such mulching practices are bad for trees, so I mentioned that to her. She stood up, looked at her work, and replied, "But I like the way it looks." Years later, however, the joke's on me, because the tree she was mulching is still thriving: a Callery Pear, now listed on [Ohio's invasive species list](#).

Another bewilderment that environmentalists must deal with is how best to convey our mission for wildness. I know that education can go only so far. A couple of years ago, a like-minded neighbor wrote a letter to the editor of our local newspaper about why using pesticides around one's home and yard is harmful to children and pets. I mentioned the letter to a couple of other neighbors who were outside chatting in our community of

meticulously kept yards and asked them what they thought. Both women had children and grandchildren, so I thought they'd be concerned. But they just kind of shrugged their shoulders. There was no discussion. I took their point that they accept the world we live in. Pesticides are used to maintain the values of the community. Life goes on. People learn to deal with the outcomes. The moral is we base our reasons on values, not the other way around.

In a 2001 issue of *Wild Ones Journal*, editor Joy Buslaff wrote, "For too long, native plant societies and our own Wild Ones chapters have been regarded as mere garden clubs. They are so much more.... We're here to demonstrate that anyone, anywhere, can affect water quality, air pollution, and noise as a result of their individual landscaping choices, as well as influencing species loss and species gain. Further, the pleasure and benefits of American plants must not be relegated to the enthusiast alone. Our inheritance of highly evolved ecosystems has to be exalted, explained, and exemplified at our schools, in this newsletter and via our own front yards until a thriving, diverse, sustainable landscape becomes an accepted norm. This is our daunting—yet thrilling—objective."

Thus, Wild Ones strives to give meaning to wildness, showing that wild landscaping, done right, is not just acceptable, but a good place to be. Maybe the best place to be.