PLANT PEOPLE Season One Episode Two 'Better Lawns' Transcript

JENNIFER BERNSTEIN NARRATION: We hear it every summer: lawn mowers buzzing, sprinklers spritzing, weed whackers whirring, sculpting the perfect lawn. There is no doubt about it - Americans love their lawns and this national obsession goes back a long way.

Maybe you've put a lot of effort into your lawn this year, and it's looking more manicured than ever. Or maybe, you're taking a step back and are re-thinking your vision.

Our nation's lawns, collectively, cover an area larger than New York State. This means that lawns are, surprisingly, the largest irrigated crop in America. The way we care for them has profound consequences - for good and for bad.

This is Plant People from NYBG. I'm your host Jennifer Bernstein, CEO & The William C. Steere Sr. President at the New York Botanical Garden.

I'm a plant person and have made it my mission to talk with enthusiasts from all walks of life who are passionate about plants. Through research, stories and conversation, this season is about how plants are connected to human thriving.

Today I talk with Edwina Von Gal from the Perfect Earth Project, whose mission is to redefine what it means to be perfect on our own pieces of land. Edwina has a lot to share on how we can work with native plants and wildlife.

JENNIFER BERNSTEIN: Hello, Edwina.

EDWINA VON GAL: Hello.

JENNIFER: It's so exciting to see you today and to be talking. Thank you for joining us on Plant People.

EDWINA: Thank you.

JENNIFER: So Edwina, can you introduce us to the mission of the Perfect Earth Project and, and tell us a little bit about how it began?

EDWINA: Oh, I'd be delighted to, it's one of my favorite things to talk about. I'm Edwina von Gal and I am the founder and chair of the board of the Perfect Earth Project. It started about, just a little over 10 years ago. I was actually starting a non-profit in Panama, of all places, and it got me thinking about issues of how we manage our lands, and why, and the information that guides our decision-making. And so people at home started asking questions, in particular my dentist.

JENNIFER: Your dentist?

EDWINA: Yes, that was the spark. You know how the bird watchers say they have a spark bird? I had a spark moment, and you know, you're helpless in the chair. And he said, I live by the water and I like to do my own gardening and I'm using chemicals on my lawn and it doesn't feel right…

JENNIFER: Ah.

EDWINA: Where can I go for information about how to do it without them? And I didn't know. And I said, I would look and I didn't find anything. And my spark was, I think I have to do this. I think this is something I really need to do. And it's of course, at that time, it was a different time in many ways. So I did a couple of years of research with my clients' gardens.

And we learned some important things. One was that they were using a lot of chemicals. And number two, that those chemicals are really bad. I had really no idea. And because I would just design the garden and I would leave and they would do whatever they did.

JENNIFER: Right.

EDWINA So I didn't think about it until I was thinking about it all the time.

JENNIFER: Right.

EDWINA: So we started asking people, well, what if we don't use these chemicals? And we didn't get any good answers. And so we tried going without, and we found that actually in many cases we get better results.

So we've just started gathering as much information and doing as many trials as we could. So I decided I'm going to launch this. I built the website and everything and

I thought I'll do this on a day I will remember. So it's kind of beautiful that this is just about our 11th anniversary because I started it on Earth Day in…

Yeah, so it was 2013 on Earth Day. So we launched then with the objective to provide good information for people about land care practices so they can make educated decisions.

JENNIFER: So let's talk a little bit about the American obsession with pristine manicured lawns and the sort of cultural significance of that. I'm sure you've thought about that and learned a lot about that history over time.

EDWINA: Well, I think that it is largely marketing. We have been told that this is what we need. Obviously, you can go all the way back to the beginnings of human communities in which the idea was to aggregate and provide a safe place.

So the best way to provide a safe place is to clear. Clear all around, you can see your enemy coming. And as you got richer, more enabled, that became grass, and then that became a symbol of wealth and power, because you could devote a good deal of area to non-agricultural purposes, and just put it out there as, I can show the world that I can command this space, and I don't need it to feed my table.

JENNIFER: So, people were sort of relaying information about their status through these lawns and then it became a, to be a cultural signifier kind of more broadly. It's a really interesting history.

What's hopeful about that history, I think, is that we do influence each other. Sort of, what's in vogue and what becomes the standard where you happen to live becomes the standard. And so, we can, over time, decide as a society to change that standard. How do you think that perceptions are changing? I mean, you've seen a lot of change over this past 11 years. What are you noticing out there? Do you think it's taking hold?

EDWINA: It is in some ways, and in other ways, totally not. And no one, I think, would step up and say, I don't care about the environment, and I don't want to do anything about it. So we now have a whole new reason to garden, in a way that is earth friendly.

It's a very compelling reason. So we're gathered around that, but I don't think that the information that people are getting is always as sound as it could be. And then

there is, of course, a great deal of pressure to conform. So you can look at conforming on one side of that coin is the traditional, conventional, I want a huge amount of lawn and it has to be monocultural and it has to be completely like unrealistically green as much of the year as possible. And then the other side of that coin is, no, I want to send a message to the world that I'm doing something that benefits the earth, not harms it.

JENNIFER: So there's this social dimension to this. There's also a sort of human dimension to it. This is the landscape directly around where we live. It affects our health and the health of the people in our communities. You know, a biodiverse landscape around your home can bring a lot of joy. You can interact with wildlife in a very different way. So how do you connect this idea of a different approach to lawn care to human thriving?

EDWINA: More joy, less stress.

JENNIFER: I love that. I love that. Who doesn't want more joy, less stress? Everybody wants that. That's a very easy message.

EDWINA: If you're sitting on your terrace looking at a patch of clover in the lawn and it's making you all agitato, you know, about, oh, the, the, the landscapers didn't… but what if you see it as, that's nitrogen fixing, it's feeding the soil, it's creating a biodiverse habitat in a place that would otherwise not be environmentally productive, it suddenly becomes, a moment of joy.

JENNIFER: Perception really matters. It really, really does. How do you think that this connects to the trends globally?

EDWINA: Oh gosh, every week there's something in one of the major news outlets about get rid of your lawn. It's a tremendously wonderful moment that the media is now supporting our message. We don't suggest to people that they have to get rid of their lawn, because there is something that lawn does that absolutely nothing else does as well, and that's maybe a Frisbee game.

JENNIFER: Right.

EDWINA: Or, you know, and, and so…

JENNIFER: A slip 'n' slide.

EDWINA Yeah, exactly, and, and so we only ask that that lawn, like, consider what you're putting on the lawn because there are really no lawn chemicals that aren't harming something, starting with you and your children and pets. And, and then think about how much lawn do you need, and we often say, based on that, how far can you throw a Frisbee? That's as much lawn as you need.

JENNIFER: It all goes back to the Frisbee.

EDWINA: Yeah, exactly, or what's the last time you walked on that part? Is the only person who's walking on that piece of lawn the person who's mowing it? Well, then that's unnecessary lawn.

JENNIFER: So I think you're starting to get into some of this, but for the audience, can you describe the basic principles that you ascribe to for nature-based, toxin-free landscaping?

EDWINA: So our basic principles are: improve biodiversity, support biodiversity, and do no harm. And so the way that happens is that, yes, you have as many different plant forms as you can. They do not all have to be native. If you sort of go for two thirds native, that's your 70%, which using birds as your key indicator species, you've got a pretty solid face there.

JENNIFER: Right.

EDWINA: The one place where I am, I guess you would say, unbending is about the use of pesticides. Pesticides includes the entire range of "cides", the killers. So that means herbicides, insecticides, rodenticides, grubicides, fungicides. And that includes organics because they kill. And we're talking about landscapes that are not feeding you, right? This is your joy and stress-less....

JENNIFER: This is for pleasure.

EDWINA: This, this is your purely for pleasure landscape. So we have to learn to share.

That, trees, plants – they are food. If they're not food for us, then why aren't we letting something else eat it? So if you see a caterpillar, you're supposed to rejoice, you know, that you're feeding wildlife in your place. That will become a moth or a butterfly or some other life form.

Why aren't we celebrating? Why are we going in and blasting them? And so there isn't really that I can ever think of a reason to resort to pesticides because there is actually less harm that will come to you. Like no harm is going to come to you because you didn't kill something. Whereas maybe in agriculture, that's a whole different conversation.

JENNIFER: One of the things that occurred to me as you were talking is just this idea that sort of underpins some of the misguided practices that we've had is that we are separate from nature. You know, that we're somehow distant from it. We are, in fact, as people, as humans, part of nature.

We're part of an ecosystem. And so, starting to understand ourselves as part of the natural world, I think is that first step to not seeing the caterpillars and the things that occur in your lawn or in your landscape as the enemy that must be eliminated.

EDWINA: True**.**

JENNIFER: We're all we're all sharing here the planet, you know, so that's a first step.

So what are some of the common misconceptions? I'm sure you've heard a lot of misconceptions about what this will mean in practice. What are some of the things you confront?

EDWINA: Well, that your lawn won't be green without chemicals. Obviously, plants are green.

JENNIFER: Right. Chlorophyll, as it were.

EDWINA: Right. And so, if your soil is reasonably healthy, your lawn will be green. Now, it might not be a monoculture, and it might not be the green you want, and it might not come as early in the season as you had in mind, but it will be green.

JENNIFER: Right, right. So if someone's starting on this journey and they want to understand the health of their soil and improve it for a more sustainable approach to gardening. how would they go about that?

EDWINA: First of all, stop harming it, because fungicides and insecticides kill the life of the soil, because the life of the soil is…

JENNIFER: And soil is alive.

EDWINA: Totally alive. Billions, they say, like billions in a tablespoon, billions of lives. And those are the same lives that constitute our own biome. The human biome has ten times more, like, microscopic lives than our human cells. And so originally when everybody said, well, these chemicals don't hurt people, they're designed to hurt their target species, not humans, but then we come to find, well, those target species are our biome. Oops.

So, and then people will tell you, well, you have to fertilize trees. No, you don't have to fertilize trees. That's another misconception. Or you have to prune trees all the time. So what do trees do without us, ever?

JENNIFER: If a tree grows in the forest without our pruning, what happens?

EDWINA: It does just fine, and in fact we really encourage people wherever possible to leave deadwood and their trees and shrubs because they attract, yeah, it's habitat, there's, it's sort of almost an endangered little ecosystem there of insects that can only live there, and the birds can eat there, and they're safe from predators, it's a beautiful thing.

JENNIFER: So, you've taken people on this journey with you, homeowners that are going through a transition in understanding how to care for their landscape. I'm sure you've seen some very rewarding moments along the way. Is there a story you can tell of someone who was skeptical that came along?

EDWINA: Well I'm trying to think, because it's sort of a big collective “ahhh”, that I think of when I think of my clients and the people we're working with.

JENNIFER: Yeah, yeah.

EDWINA: So I was speaking for the Garden Club of St. Louis, and I told them all of my stories about, letting go and stepping into nature, letting nature make choices in your landscapes, and at the end there was sort of silence in the room and I thought, yikes, I think I missed my mark on this audience. And then they all started

cheering and afterwards they came up and they said, you know what we realized? Our gardens are all in shapewear. And, and I thought that…

JENNIFER: Funny.

EDWINA: They said, we gotta get us out of the shapewear.

JENNIFER: Put on some yoga pants.

EDWINA: Mm hmm, yeah. Exactly. Let it go.

Start breathing. And, and so, and I've all, and whenever I see a, a landscape filled with what I call design for dependency, when every shrub or in the place needs a regular dose of torture, basically, you know, errr, clip, clip, clip, clip. So people recognize it as a form that if you don't know your plants, what makes you feel like, your garden is recognizable as if it's all balls and squares. And then control reigns in your world. But of course, that takes a lot of resource.

So how can we take people into this other realm of feeling comfortable with nature making decisions in their landscape and not, your landscape does not look the same today, tomorrow, next year, the year after, and you are putting increasing efforts into keeping it that way.

It's like after a while you can't do any more facelifts.

JENNIFER: Yeah. Yeah.

EDWINA: Things go really wrong.

JENNIFER: You know, it doesn't surprise me your story about talking to the garden club because the skills that gardeners have are exactly the skills that we need to restore so many of these landscapes. It is the plant knowledge. It is the knowledge of, of the flora and the understanding of how to grow.

And so the idea that gardeners can put those skills to use in this way, that will bring a lot of joy to them, but also will support the broader ecosystem, I think is really very exciting.

There's a number of these movements that have come forward, things like No Mow May and bee lawns. And, we talked a little bit earlier about the sort of global awareness of these issues. And, I think it's encouraging that there's these ground swells.

How do you think about some of these movements that are coming forward?

EDWINA: They're all a wonderful start. They're not, they're not, they're not a finish. They're a beginning. So no mow May. Well, what about then no mow June, July, August?

So I suggest just reduce the amount of lawn and let the rest go and you could rotate the mowing so you could mow half this year and mow the other half next year or some other way or just start letting it become full-time flowers.

But yeah, so it's a, it's a great beginning because it's really made people aware of the fact that their lawn can have environmental benefits.

JENNIFER NARRATION: And those environmental benefits begin when you start doing less to your lawn.

Soon, you'll be ready to explore your new lawn and see what sprouts up besides grass. Right after the break, how to look for and encourage biodiversity.

[BREAK]

JENNIFER NARRATION: This is Plant People from NYBG. I'm Jennifer Bernstein. I've been talking with Edwina Von Gal from the Perfect Earth Project about how we can and *should* let nature be our guide in designing and caring for our home landscapes.

This conversation focuses on the importance of biodiversity, even in our own backyards. Put simply, this means the variety of plants and animals that can be sustained by a space. And, lawns being mostly one thing -- a monoculture-- means not a lot of biodiversity. But biodiversity is what makes species thrive. We need it.

JENNIFER: So, let's talk a little bit about the biodiversity. We're a biodiversity organization. We have natural history collections. Our scientists are very much focused on biodiversity conservation. Can you talk a little bit about some of the

experiences that you've had seeing biodiversity come back into the places that you're helping people to manage?

EDWINA: Well, um, it's as much what it does to the people as it does to the place because I'm only just beginning to start working with clients in terms of tracking, actually tracking the biodiversity. So, for instance, for a client I have up in North Salem, when we started, it was very conventionally managed.

It's actually a design I did 30 years ago and came back and went, Oh, I've changed. And so the client was really into it. And now he's acquired more and more land. So he has woods and streams and stuff. And so we said, well, let's do this. And so we've been doing biodiversity surveys.

So we started with a basic, what's called the absence presence to see what's there vs what could be there. What's not there. What do you want to do about that? Why is that happening? Now we're moving into much more specific things. We're starting on the insects because they're harder. We've done bird surveys.And the goal is ultimately that we can find ways that these kind of practices could be available to people at any scale. So even if somebody has a small property, we can say, count this, this, and this, and you will know how you stand. So how many plants of what type do you really need in a small space to – It's all about, are you earth positive or earth negative? I call it the yardstick. How do we measure…

JENNIFER: Yeah. Yeah.

EDWINA: How do you measure your, your environmental effectiveness?

JENNIFER: It brings me to this other question, which is, I think for some people it might seem like these are not ideas that are accessible for folks at every kind of income level. So how do you think about that?

EDWINA: Anybody can just stop mowing and watch what happens. And it costs you less to do what we recommend because you're not buying chemicals and you may be mowing less and you're not hiring people to come in and whack away at your trees.

Every cut's a wound, and we try to tell you, you don't need all that water. So there are lots of resources that we're saving. And then we say, use your time differently.

Which is get out your phone or a book and start identifying the insects that are crawling around in this new wildness that you have spawned.

And just sit with your children quietly and watch who shows up.

JENNIFER: Mhmm.

EDWINA: Listen for the birds. Get your Merlin out.

JENNIFER: Merlin's great; plug for Merlin.

EDWINA: If anybody doesn't know about Merlin, download that app and get an iNaturalist for everything else. And, you have a mini botanical garden like Doug Tallamy says, like a Homegrown National Park is in your yard, and that is free.

And then you can do that yourself, and you don't have to be fancy about it, you don't have to write it down or take a count; it's simply fascinating if in the course of an afternoon you do that instead of pushing a mower around.

JENNIFER: It's an interesting dichotomy because doing it this way is actually less resource intensive on really every level, including your time. Your time can be about the enjoyment of the landscape instead of the kind of management of it.

What have you learned along the way that surprised you the most?

EDWINA: Well, I guess it's not actually a happy thing, but it's been very important to me moving forward; is to realize that the conventional landscape industry is probably not going to start producing the people who are going to inform homeowners in environmental practices. But the good side of that is that there is an incredible group of young people out there who want to do something good for the environment who have probably not thought about landscaping, land care as a career, and we're engaging them in a whole new way.

I mean, think of it as your land care person now becomes your restoration specialist, who can really inform you about which are the native plants on your property, how to manage what you've got, how to make it ever better.

JENNIFER: I think it is encouraging to see this energy from young people across a range of the different environmental issues that we're confronting and the interest in land and in land use and in horticulture. We have a school of professional horticulture, which has been a longstanding program here at NYBG all the way back to actually, it was a workforce development program after World War I.

So it's a very longstanding program. And the interest now among the people coming into the program really is around the sustainable horticulture. So, it may be that these shifts are hard at the sort of industry scale, but there are definitely people out there hungry to see it happen.

EDWINA: So we're, and we're so happy that your school of professional horticulture is pivoting to this and meeting the needs of the environment and turning out wonderful gardeners, because they then set the pace for other people to do the same. They are the examples that other young people – but they don't have to be young. I'm an example of that.

JENNIFER: That's right.

EDWINA: We call them land care professionals now, not landscape professionals, because really it's about caring for the land. And we hope that the kind of people who come to your classes at the botanical garden to learn about plants who have traditionally been a particular kind of maybe garden-club gardener or private-garden gardener or flowerbed gardener.

Why aren't our landscape professionals coming to those classes? And how can we change that? And so that's kind of the challenge I'm putting out to actually land owners, homeowners, everywhere, is ask your landscapers to learn, learn about plants.

JENNIFER: well that's a great way to encourage a dialogue, too, between homeowners and the land care professionals that are working on their piece of the planet, because I think that these are folks that are interacting with the natural world all day long, and I would imagine there's a lot of receptivity if there's an openness in that model. To learn…

EDWINA: We hope so.

JENNIFER: And there's a lot of resources now out there, digitally and in all kinds of ways for people to learn.

EDWINA: Yeah but we did find that people do get to a point where they would say to me, couldn't you just come over? And so that's what we're doing now. We're actually ramping up a lot so that we can give people a brief, but hopefully super helpful on-site consultation so they know what they've got. It's what you would call it, like know your place.

JENNIFER: I can imagine that you do get that question because, sometimes it's hard to tell. There's a limit to the apps and what they can tell you.

So Edwina, you mentioned the Homegrown National Park work of Doug Tallamy, who we're also going to be speaking to as part of the Plant People podcast. And I know that you have a program Two Thirds for the Birds that at least in part was based on Doug's work, I think. Could you talk a little bit about that?

EDWINA: Oh sure, when Doug brought out his book *Nature's Best Hope*; um, actually he gave me an advance copy because it was during COVID and when I read it, it was sort of revelatory for me because he actually puts a number on how many native plants you should have in your yard to have a functioning ecosystem.

Because otherwise you're just out there saying, Oh, you should have lots of native plants.

JENNIFER: Right. What's lots? Yeah.

EDWINA: That's just fuzzy. And, and I like to be specific. So that's what he said, 70%, but I played with that and got him up with two thirds for the birds. And so that's what we're recommending and it's going very well.

JENNIFER: So tell me about how our listeners can get involved with the Perfect Earth Project.

EDWINA: It's perfectearthproject.org. On our website you can download our book that tells the story of what perfect practices are and how to start using them in your yard. Sign up for our newsletter, of course. We will not fill your inbox.

You'll just get an occasional information about what we're up to and when we're coming to your neighborhood, or what materials we're making available to people. And I write a monthly column called Radicle Thinking. Radicle spelled with an L E, which is the first living point that comes out of a seed.

Seeds are a big thing right now in landscape in the environmental world and I'd love to see more people grow trees from seed.

JENNIFER: Ah, wonderful. Edwina, it's so wonderful talking with you. I'm a big admirer of yours and everything that you're doing to change the conversation. So thank you for taking the time today.

EDWINA: Well, thank you very much from one plant person to another.

JENNIFER NARRATION: The work doesn't end here. After listening to the episode, you can put Edwina's advice into action at home. The ideas you just heard about, like native plants and avoiding toxic chemicals, plus other tips, such as how to deeply water your lawn, are all mapped out for you at Perfect Earth Project dot org. NYBG's Mertz Library is also a great resource for lawn care tips, and we'll link to those in the show notes.

In our next episode, my guest will be Michael Dockry, Assistant Professor in the Forest Resource and American Indian Studies Departments at the University of Minnesota. He's an expert on how indigenous communities, including his own, have used fire to manage forests for centuries; and how mainstream fire suppression techniques of the last 100 years probably have led to *more* extreme fires.

Thanks for listening to Plant People. We're excited to bring you more stories about plants and the people who love, study, and care for them in new episodes dropping every two weeks.

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