

# THE HILLCREST MEADOW & HABITAT GARDEN: Challenging Lawn Order (Biodiversity, Bylaws, Barriers to the Biophilic City)



Wild-flowers and grasses including black-eyed susan's and goldenrod fill the meadow. Photo Credit: Lorraine Johnson, 2020

The Hillcrest Meadow and Habitat Garden at 66 Hillcrest Drive is a living landscape and urban habitat in west-midtown Toronto, home to a wide variety of native and naturalized species of trees, shrubs and perennials. The

garden has been featured in [many news stories](#), including being named among [Wallpaper Magazine's best gardens](#). For over a decade, the garden has been thoughtfully tended to, cultivated, stewarded, and maintained by [Nina-](#)



[Marie Lister](#) (a landscape ecologist, Professor at [Toronto Metropolitan University](#), and Director of the [Ecological Design Lab](#)) and her husband Jeremy Guth, a long-time conservation advocate and founding director of [ARC Solutions](#).

What was once predominantly turfgrass – a desert for biodiversity, Lister and her family transformed the front-yard into a [lush and layered landscape](#), creating a biodiverse haven of carefully selected native and non-native plants (including milkweed, bee balm, aster, boneset, and black-eyed Susans, among others), providing pollinators with essential shelter and ample nectar.

The garden includes a green-roof and terraced planter beds in addition to the front-yard meadow, and is a sanctuary for many species of songbirds, woodpeckers, owls and at-risk insects like monarch butterflies and solitary bees, as well as other urban creatures including toads, rabbits and chipmunks. In addition to enhancing biodiversity and habitat in the city, this natural garden also serves as a stormwater management system, ecologically-designed to help with water retention and filtration, holding stormwater and controlling runoff.



The garden is interpreted with educational ecologically-informed signage. Photo Credit: NM Lister, 2024



The garden is home to many important pollinator species including Bumble Bees. Photo Credit: NM Lister, 2023





The garden has been carefully designed with curated native and non-native plants, and hosts an abundance of species. Photo Credit: NM Lister, 2023

The Hillcrest Meadow is a powerful example of design activism, taking an approach that leads with landscape by using a diversity of plants as a small-scale but critical solution, in combating the greatest crises of our time – climate change and biodiversity loss. For the local community, the garden also represents opportunities for teaching and respite, often frequented by passerbys who sit on the logs to enjoy a moment in nature in the city surrounded by birdsong, butterflies, and textured seasonal foliage.

In 2020, the [Hillcrest Meadow and Habitat Garden were threatened](#), when

the City of Toronto ordered the garden to be cut down, charging Lister with a violation of Toronto's Grass and Weeds Property Standards – a bylaw that restricts vegetation height on private property to 20cm. Not only does [this bylaw stand in opposition to numerous public policy initiatives](#) (e.g., the Toronto Biodiversity Strategy (2019) and the Pollinator Protection Strategy (2018)) that aim to enhance biodiversity and strengthen climate resilience across Toronto, but it also limits residents' ability to plant native species and create pollinator habitat on their private property.



Although not requested, [Lister's garden was later granted an exemption](#) from the bylaw. With help from environmental lawyer David Donnelly, [Lister publicly fought the violation notice](#) and exemption arguing that the bylaw is hypocritical, citing that citizens have both a constitutionally-protected right and obligation to support nature at home in their gardens.

Through the Ecological Design Lab, Lister and her students developed ecologically-informed [policy recommendations](#) and a revised "[model bylaw](#)", to aid and inform the City of Toronto (and other municipalities) on

how they may amend their property standards bylaws to better support environmental stewardship. The model bylaw was [incorporated into the 2021 amendment](#) made to the [Toronto Turfgrass and Prohibited Plants](#) bylaw, removing the exemption process for natural gardens.



Red and white clover, daisies and other wild-flowers in the garden. Photo Credit: NM Lister, 2023



Fallen logs left in the garden nourish the soil, create pollinator habitat and seating for passersby. Photo Credit: NM Lister, 2023





Aerial image of the seasonal foliage at the Hillcrest Garden. Photo Credit: Micheal Awad, 2020

This success acted as the catalyst for the Ecological Design Lab's [Bylaws for Biodiversity project](#) that since 2021, has supported municipal-wide environmental stewardship across Canada, to better protect and promote biodiversity across public and private lands, through the revision of outdated, colonially-rooted weed and grass by-laws. Once a battleground, the Hillcrest Meadow and Habitat Garden is now a beacon of hope for many who are forced to defend their right to environmental stewardship, and wish to make a meaningful difference for biodiversity in their yards and gardens.

Today, the Hillcrest Meadow and Habitat Garden are flourishing – an example of how everyone, anywhere, can re-connect people to nature in our cities.



## Select Media Featuring the Hillcrest Meadow & Habitat Garden:

- [Architectural gardens around the world to soothe the soul](#): Wallpaper, March 27 2024
- Op-ed [Gardens have become battlegrounds in the climate crisis](#): Toronto Star, August 13, 2023
- [Changing a Toronto By-law for Biodiversity](#): City Building TMU, June 2022
- [Interview: Nina-Marie Lister](#): Canadian Architect, April 1, 2022
- ['Episode 18: Bylaws and Biodiversity with Nina-Marie Lister, Nov. 16, 2021'](#): Biophilic Solutions Podcast, November, 2021
- [The Connected Landscapes of Nina-Marie Lister](#): Azure Magazine, November 16, 2021
- [Margolese prize winner Nina-Marie Lister builds cities the way you care for a garden](#): The Globe and Mail, September 28, 2021
- ['Podcast Episode 14, The Yard Versus Toronto, with Nina-Marie Lister, June 2021'](#): Plant Crimes Podcast, June, 2021
- [The "No Mow May" Challenge is on](#): Greenpeace Canada, May 13, 2021
- [Barriers, by-laws, and the biophilic city](#): Ryerson University (renamed Toronto Metropolitan University), 2021
- [Stand your constitutional ground - Return of the Native Hardy Perennials](#): Return of the Native, 2021
- ['What kind of barbarian would mow buttercups?'](#): Ecologist fights back: The Toronto Star, October 2020
- [Ecologist fighting city hall](#): CBC News, October 10, 2020
- [Meadow Politics](#): CBC Radio, Here and Now, October 8, 2020
- [Is It Time To Rethink Our Lawns?](#): The Peterborough & Area Master Gardeners, September 2020
- Op-Ed [Battle Over Front-Yard Meadow Thick With Irony](#): The Toronto Star, September 2020
- [Ryerson Professor Advocates For Lawn Biodiversity In Toronto](#): The Eyeopener, September 2020
- [Ecologists wild garden is a challenge to lawn order](#): The Globe and Mail, August 2020