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GARDEN REGULATIONS
rethinking milkweed

"I was having a great day," says Doreen Nicoll, "until I got home and saw the notice on my door." The notice, dated June 28, 2018, was from the City of Burlington and directed Nicoll, who has lived in the house for more than twenty years, to remove the milkweed from her front-yard garden or the City would remove the plants for her and give her a bill.

Nicoll hadn't planted the milkweed. The plants were volunteers, but she wasn't surprised that they had just shown up, since her lot had been a farmer's field until it sprouted new houses instead of crops. Nicoll was likewise not surprised by the City's removal notice—hers, she says, is the only "naturalistic" garden in an area full of clipped lawns and regimented plantings, and she suspects that her landscape's non-conformity irked some of her neigh-

Up Front: Information on the Ground

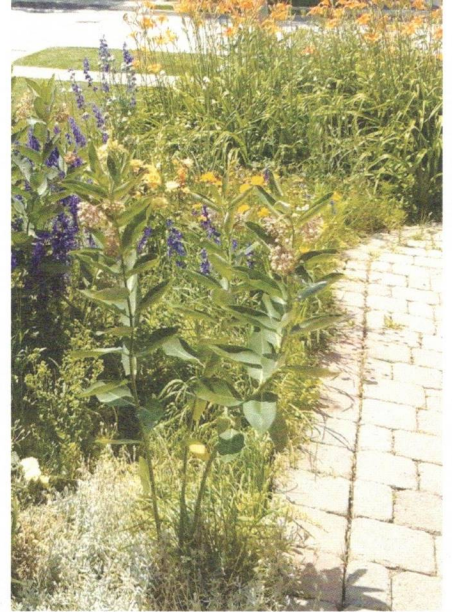
bours. "My entire neighbourhood is grass," she explains, whereas her garden, which she originally planted with edibles but is now full of delphiniums, peonies, daylilies, roses, daisies, and calendula—"whatever does well with just rainwater"—is exuberant, colourful, and free-form. "It doesn't take any work," says Nicoll, who recently put down woodchips in a nod to the neighbourhood aesthetic.

Nicoll is a high-school teacher and environmental activist who was involved, years ago, in the successful fight to ban cosmetic pesticides in Ontario. After she received the removal notice from the City, she started emailing and phoning former comrades from the pesticide battle to determine her options. She researched the province's weed law and discovered that milkweed had been removed from Ontario's Noxious Weed List in 2014. She was incensed to discover, however, that milkweed remained on Burlington's list of regulated "weeds," despite the fact that milkweed is the only known larval host plant for the monarch butterfly, a species designated by the federal government as "Special Concern," at risk of extinction.

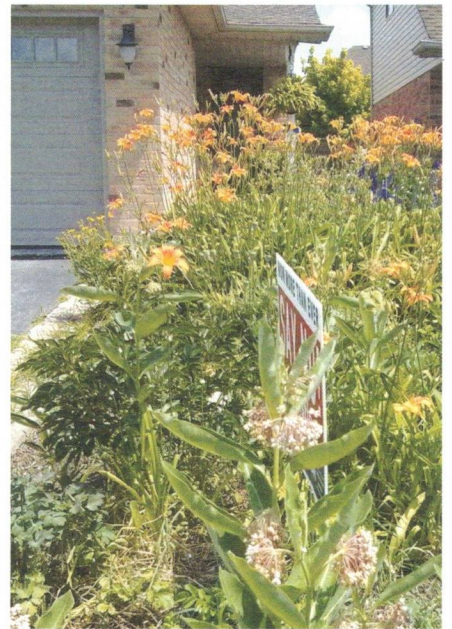
"It's ironic," Nicoll further explains, "because the City gives out free milkweed seeds and plants to people who want to plant it for monarchs." Armed with information, Nicoll phoned the weed inspector ("he was very nice," she notes) and went public with her story, speaking in the media and writing an article for the news website rabble.ca.

Her activism had speedy effect. The evening before the seven-day deadline to remove her milkweed, Nicoll received an email from the Chief Planner and Director, City Building, of Burlington, notifying Nicoll that the milkweed could stay. The City was granting a moratorium on milkweed-cutting-notices until the autumn, when it planned to change the bylaw and remove milkweed from the local weed list.

"This outcome was a lot better than I expected," says Nicoll. As for the neighbours who can't abide anything other than



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"neat and tidy" lawns and complain about "naturalistic" landscapes, "Get over it," says Nicoll, "these gardens aren't going away."

TEXT BY LORRAINE JOHNSON, EDITOR OF *GROUND* AND AUTHOR OF BOOKS ON NATIVE PLANT GARDENING.

01-03/ The City of Burlington ordered Doreen Nicoll to remove the milkweed plants from her garden.

IMAGES/ Doreen Nicoll

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