

Haddam Garden Club

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by Terry Twigg



Dance of the Fireflies

Last month I wrote that I had followed “No Mow May.” May stretched into June, and now July, as I discover an entirely new, almost unrecognizable world in my own back yard.

Lawn is synonymous with green uniformity, but the range of colors and textures just waiting to show their stuff is remarkable. Now, in high summer, I find pink stems tipped with clotted oatmeal, green stems wearing purple chenille seedheads, red stems with dainty feathers, wiry tan stems with neat braided rows of wheaten seeds, even almost-blue grasses. They create a tapestry of color on the ground, and add fireworks to a vase of summer flowers.

My neighbor lives in a handsome Federal house, surrounded by exquisitely-kept gardens perfectly suited to the formal architecture. I spoke somewhat apologetically about my wild yard, assuring him I’ll mow it eventually, but his answer took me by surprise. “I was just thinking how pretty it looks. ‘Amber waves of grain.’” The description used to sound cliched, but now I realize just how apt it really is. As the grass lengthened it bowed into graceful waves of silver-gilt, glistening in the sun. The long shimmering stems do ripple just like the river, catching and reflecting the light differently as the breezes shift.

The wildlife appreciates the difference. I’ve read heartbreaking stories of failed birds’ nests, where desperate parents, unable to find enough soft-bodied insects, tried to feed seeds to their babies. But the robins at the top of the lilacs found plenty of bugs in my pesticide-free yard, and their babies have fledged and moved on. My pond is teeming with frogs, which are an important indicator of the general health of the ecosystem. The peepers’ season is done, replaced by the trilling of tree frogs and measured pronouncements of bullfrogs. They hide in the tall growth at water’s edge, and when I approach, they jump to safety in a perfectly timed, perfectly spaced sequence, for all the world like a row of chorus girls in an Esther Williams movie. Two frogs have claimed the courtyard fountain pool. Their bronze bodies exactly match Raphael, my cherub fountain; they even have streaks of verdigris. Half submerged, they watch balefully while I perform the task I refer to as “weeding” but which they regard as “removing essential cover.” Fear not, guys, I’ll replant the desert.

There are some drawbacks, of course. Bittersweet and wild raspberries press relentlessly from the margins. I have to guard against ticks. I can’t spot the woodchuck in the tall grass, though sometimes his progress is apparent when stems bend as he waddles past. I grew dahlias outside the fence for the last three years, and nothing touched them, but this year’s plants are badly chewed by something—deer? The woodchuck? Did the long grass bring them closer in, or did they just decide to change up the menu? I do know that the rascally Munk

brothers, Chip and Thelonious, appreciate the cover as they help themselves to not-quite-ripe strawberries, which seem to be the only kind my garden produces: they start out white, begin to flush pink, and disappear. I have been blaming the birds. Must remember to apologize.

But the best surprise of this no-mow summer is the fireflies, *photinus pyralis*. When I was a kid, they filled summer evenings, and we made a game out of trying to guess the direction of their zigzagging flight. Sadly, like so many other insects, their numbers have declined. The culprits are familiar; loss of habitat, chemical poisons, and light pollution. These are common threats to many species, but the third—light pollution—poses a unique problem for fireflies. If your lifespan is only a few months, and you can only attract a mate with your tiny flashing light, every street light, porch light, and flood light reduces your chance of getting a date. Just as we can't see the moon on a sunny day, they can't see each other's signals.

During my first four summers here, fireflies were a rarity. But their response to a changed environment has been dramatic. The unmown grass encourages a buffet of snails, slugs and worms, free of toxins, and so the larvae thrive. Adults, ready for mating, flaunt their signals in darkness, unspoiled by artificial lights. Now, when twilight arrives, my yard sparkles with the flashes of dozens of dancing creatures. The air becomes an invisible Christmas tree on which the lights not only twinkle, but move. How could a boring lawn even begin to compete with such a display?

Our children and grandchildren deserve to experience the joy of summer nights filled with fireflies. Please, leave at least part of your yard wild. Reject pesticides and herbicides as the life-killers they are. And even if you feel you must have outdoor lighting during the long winter nights, please, when spring arrives, **TURN OUT THE LIGHTS.**