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In Philadelphia, Going Green or Growing Wild?

By ANNE RAVER

PHILADELPHIA

MARGIE RUDDICK, a designer known for her elegant ecological landscapes, got a summons from the City of Philadelphia last year, citing her East Mount Airy yard as being in violation of the property maintenance code.

“For weeds over 10 inches,” said Ms. Ruddick, 54, standing beside her favorite pokeweed a few weeks ago. By August, it will be laden with purple berries, poisonous to humans but a favorite of the birds.

About a year after she stopped mowing the lawn here in 2005, black cherry seedlings showed up in the tall grasses and wild asters. In the next few years, oaks, mulberry and rose of Sharon moved in.

“There wasn’t a lot of order or maintenance, and it did look a little unkempt,” said her neighbor John Siemiarowski, who lives across the street. But “the worst of it now is that we can’t see the Komodo dragon anymore.”

That life-size wooden sculpture, which Ms. Ruddick brought back from Bali, is now hidden behind a coppiced grove of black cherry trees. And nearby, rising from a thicket of raspberries that Mr. Siemiarowski likes to graze on, is a National Wildlife Federation sign reading “certified wildlife habitat.”

Two years into Ms. Ruddick’s experiment, when this sea of seedling trees had no shape, she said: “People were freaked out that it looked abandoned. I had a sign that said ‘This house is not for sale,’ because people would come to the window and look in.”

A friend from the Deep South told her: “Margie, you’ve gone country. All you need is an old refrigerator and couch with the springs poking out setting there on your porch.”

Ms. Ruddick, who has a degree in landscape architecture from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design, had her own practice for 16 years, first with Judith Heintz in Manhattan, then on her own in Philadelphia, where her small team designed both private and public landscapes sensitive to the sites. She likes to collaborate, as she did in 1996 when she worked with the environmental artist Betsy Damon and Chinese designers to create the Living Water park in Chengdu, China, which cleanses polluted water with a series of ponds and constructed wetlands.

In 2004, she and her team became part of WRT, a Philadelphia design firm that bases its work on sustainable principles. As a partner, she collaborated with Marpillero Pollak Architects and the environmental artist Michael Singer to bring nature to Queens Plaza with permeable paving and rain gardens that absorb storm water pouring off the [Queensboro Bridge](#), and curving forests of hornbeam trees, shadbowl and redbud that echo the arc of the elevated train line.

“I’m one of the finalists this year for the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Award,” she said, showing off the chicken coop near the compost pile. “Which makes this kind of hilarious.” (She received the Audubon Women in Conservation’s Rachel Carson Award in 2006 and the Lewis Mumford Award from Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility in 2002, among others.)

What she’s doing here is a backyard version of those great urban parks going green.

No matter. In March, she stood before a hearings officer in the city Department of Licenses and Inspections, arguing like any other beleaguered citizen that she didn’t deserve a \$75 fine.

“I was armed with photographs,” she said. “I told the judge: ‘This is actually not a weed. It’s *Prunus serotina*, a black cherry seedling. This is not a weed. It’s an oak tree, *Quercus alba*. The 10-inch weeds are rhubarb.’”

The judge stared at the photographs. They looked like weeds, but they had botanical names. This tall woman (she is 5-foot-11 in her bare feet) looked perfectly sane in her clean, pressed trousers and tailored blouse. The fine was canceled, and Ms. Ruddick went home and began searching for a gardener who could bring enough order to her yard-gone-wild to forestall another summons and to allay neighbors' fears about declining property values.

"You have to allow a certain amount of mess to create a habitat," she said. But "it also pushes a boundary that's very uncomfortable: the sloppiness and the ugliness, the awkward moments when things are cut" before "it starts to get its own shape."

Across the street, Mr. Siemiarowski's wife, Elayne Bender, was intrigued.

"I wondered what she was doing, but given who she is, I trusted that it would turn out to be something I'd want to look at," Ms. Bender said.

Ms. Ruddick arrived in 2005. Divorced the year before, she had a clear idea of what she needed in a house.

"I was a single mom of a certain age," she said. "I did not want to be running up and down stairs. I wanted to be able to say, 'Go to your room' and hear whether someone was pulling up the floorboards with a screwdriver."

The house, built in 1948, had been on the market for months, on a block where houses sell in "15 minutes," Ms. Ruddick said. "But that was because it was so ugly. Tiny rooms and a lot of pinkness: pink couches, pink valances, pink curtains."

But behind the curtains were floor-to-ceiling windows that let in plenty of light from the south-facing backyard. All she had to do was tear down the walls to turn the house into an open California-style bungalow. And get rid of the pink.

She bought the house for \$255,000 and hired a contractor to do just that, and to turn the garage into a master-suite studio with big windows and skylights.

With little money left for landscaping, Ms. Ruddick decided to embrace the philosophy embodied in a line she remembered from an old New Yorker: "Don't just do something. Stand there!"

She made a mowing plan for her yard, leaving a certain amount of lawn as play space for her children and a few mowed paths, especially one between her growing forest and the sidewalk. "So people see that it's intentional," she said.

Then she hired someone to cut the paths and play space (about 3,400 square feet) every two weeks.

The rest of her yard (almost 7,500 square feet) is forest and shrubs. She rarely waters, except her tiny vegetable patch, and a few shrubs during drought. Rainwater is funneled off the roof into the landscape.

Not only is she not using city water to irrigate a lawn, she is keeping water from flooding the sewers.

Noah Garrison, a project lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council's national water program, puts it this way: "For every 11 or 12 houses that allow the same area to convert from lawn to woodland, annual storm-water runoff could be decreased by roughly the volume of an Olympic swimming pool: 660,000 gallons."

Mr. Garrison also notes that a yard planted entirely with trees sequesters many times the carbon dioxide that a lawn does, "keeping all that CO₂ from the atmosphere and reducing the energy used to pump water for the lawn or to run a gas-powered lawnmower."

To tame her forest, she found a gardener who understood that. Together they have coppiced, or pruned to four feet, the black cherry trees, creating a hedgelike thicket facing the street. Young oaks have been pruned to resemble open-branched shrubs.

She has ignored the don't-plant-one-of-everything rule. (Designers are supposed to plant in sweeps and repetitions.)

"This is like a Garden of Eden," she said. "These little trees are so sweet you want to take care of them."

But she also adds and edits. She has planted magnolias and viburnums near the front of the house, and holly trees to cloak the ugly awning.

And she has pruned her stand of pokeweed, putting in a few miscanthus, to soften the self-seeded oaks that hide the brush pile (another conservation strategy in violation of city code).

“But it never gets any bigger,” she said. “And I haven’t transported any yard waste off the property.”

SHE left WRT in 2007 to spend time with her children and her mother, Dorothy Ruddick, an artist who died in 2010. She also wanted to get back to drawing and to designing for those who share her commitment to environmental issues.

“It was really clear to me that the model of perpetual growth didn’t work,” Ms. Ruddick said, reflecting on the years she spent building her practice and then the one at WRT. “You do less and less design work because you have to go out and get more jobs to build your empire.”

She has written a book she hopes to publish, “What Are We Doing Here, Anyway?” It questions how people can be truly “green” when they haven’t changed any of their fundamental behaviors. What good is a rain garden in Queens Plaza, for example, if the city won’t reduce the number of traffic lanes on the Queensboro Bridge?

She worked for years in India, she said, where people stop for the rituals that mark the passages of life.

“How many times has somebody gotten married, and you just can’t go because of too much work or something?” she asked. “They don’t miss these things. The whole place stops. I feel like we just don’t stop enough.”

What a radical thought: just standing there, in the gardens, and in our lives, too.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/21/garden/in-philadelphia-a-garden-grows-wild.html?ref=style>