

# Going Organic in West Hartford

Homeowners Ann Reynolds and Doug Rankin Encourage Neighbors to “Kiss My Grass”

*Dream Clients not only Chose an Organic Lawn, but Started a Movement*

By Kathy Litchfield

West Hartford, CT –

Ann Reynolds and Doug Rankin, with their two babies in tow, clearly remember the day they showed up at the state’s capital to lobby for the preservation of the K-8 school grounds pesticide ban in 2010.

“People looked cross eyed at us, like how out of place. We were the only family there,” said Reynolds, “but we were so invigorated by it, with a sense of wow, there’s so much going on. As parents it was so in our best interest to have abigger say. It was eye opening.”

Over the last 10 years or so, the couple found themselves “hyper aggravated” by all of the little pesticide spraying signs they spotted. So, they decided to counter these signs by creating one of their own. It reads “Kiss My Grass” and “Pesticide Free” and is available via the website they designed to promote “Grass Roots West Hartford, a



movement among residents to reclaim control over the livability of our town,” they said.

“While there are many things outside of our control, we can most definitely choose not to pollute our neighborhoods with pesticides and herbicides. And so starts a grassroots effort among neighbors to make our lawns, parks and schools once again safe places for all of us to roam, play, walk, breath, drink, and care for our families, children and pets,” they wrote, and the idea is catching on.

Co-founded in March 2015 with friend Kim Hughes, they held a kick-off event that drew over 50 local residents and their state representative, Joe Verrengia. Grass Roots West Hartford invites people to get involved, choose a pesticide free lawn and spread the word. They already have over 325 Facebook fans, many of whom write supportive comments and share photos of their lawns with the signs.

So far, purely on a volunteer basis, the three have distributed 250 lawn signs, placed an order for 500 more, and also offer T-shirts. They’ve marketed the movement at local events including “Celebrate West Hartford” and through the NOFA Organic Land Care Program.

To further show their commitment to organic lawns, they also hired Todd Harrington of Harrington’s Organic Land Care in Bloomfield, Conn. to manage their own half-acre lawn at their suburban home.

“Ann and Doug are dream clients, of course,” said Harrington. “They are really concerned citizens and activists when it comes to pesticides. You don’t often find people so passionate about wanting to get people in the region away from pesticides. But they have children and are educated consumers who understand plants, and are fully committed to their mission.”

Harrington began working on the Reynolds/Rankin lawn this year and so far has applied corn gluten, aerated and activated compost teas and custom blended fertilizers. He plans to seed this fall with appropriate drought-tolerant grasses. “(Doug and Ann) have a much higher threshold than most people when it comes to weeds. We’re building up the fertility of their soil following soil test recommendations. They had never treated their lawn before this so anything we do will be a



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benefit,” said Harrington, who always promotes food gardens over lawns, and delivered a yard of his “super soil” - a soil mix generated at his lab that grows “phenomenal nutrient dense food” - to the couple’s vegetable garden beds where they grow lettuce, nasturtiums, peas, kale and even native corn.

“We toured Todd’s facility and learned about the super soil to enhance our garden. We’re pleased with his work and happy that we can support a local business that is doing the right thing,” said Rankin, who originally met Todd through Bill Duesing, former executive director of CT NOFA.

Rankin has been volunteering at CT NOFA conferences for years and even took the Organic Land Care Accreditation Course in 2005 to educate himself. He remembers leaving and feeling incredibly inspired by Todd Harrington’s and Chip Osborne’s presentations in particular.

He grew up in West Hartford and remembers his father, a physician and naturalist, being a “late adaptor” to modern medicines.

“He believed real health came from your diet, your sleep, not smoking, basic things. His holistic view of the world, unbeknownst to me, probably rubbed off on me,” he said.

Reynolds, native to Wethersfield, recalled attending “Fashion Week” in Manhattan one week and the next week, being invited by Doug to volunteer at a NOFA organic farming conference.

“So I went, and then I thought everybody should come to this. It moved my world,” she said. “Doug’s always been way ahead of the curve. As a single guy in his 30s he bought into the CSA thing before it was common vernacular. On his own he bought a farm share meant to feed four!”

When they’re not hosting gatherings, distributing lawn signs and organizing for GMO labeling, organic lawns and Grass Roots, the couple operates their own small business as wine importers and wholesalers. They work with as many wineries as they can that “practice legitimate organic, sustainable and biodynamic farming practices in their wine making,” said Rankin, and distribute the wine to retail stores and restaurants in Connecticut.

Along with raising their two children, now aged 6 and 7, the couple is hard at work promoting and hoping that their message, through the “Kiss My Grass” lawn signs and outreach efforts, will spread far and wide.

“The chemical industry in the United States is really an unregulated free for all,” said Rankin. “We’re trying to get people to make smart decisions voluntarily now. There is a lot of work that has to be done. The chemical companies are strong. We have to build a legitimate grassroots movement. The choice of the word ‘grassroots’ is the operative word. The way to make a permanent change here is to change people’s attitudes and that’s what we’re trying to do.”

For more info or to get involved, visit [www.grassrootswesthartford.org](http://www.grassrootswesthartford.org).

