

# Going Organic in Long Island and Beyond



## The Perfect Earth Project

By Kathy Litchfield  
East Hampton, NY –

While perched in her dentist's chair one morning five years ago, Edwina von Gal realized she didn't know of a landscaper offering chemical free lawn care to suggest to her dentist, who was concerned about toxins from his waterfront lawn sinking into Long Island sound.

"I had been a landscape designer for a zillion years and I had always been an organic gardener in my own place. I was gravitating through the years towards more and more natural gardening for my clients too," said the 67-year-old founder of The Perfect Earth Project (PRFCT Earth PRJCT), a two-year-old non-profit educational organization promoting toxin-free landscape management based in East Hampton, Long Island.

"My basic design concept was always to get people to stop and look at the natural beauty of intrinsic things, like the bark of a tree. But it was always a bit of subtext. Now times have changed and I realized then, that this is a message I could fully embrace. I soon found that more people were asking for chemical free lawns and I needed to learn more about this," said the Brewster, NY native who grew up in dairy farm country running around outdoors unsupervised and gaining a love and comfort of nature that has been a constant thread throughout her life.

Edwina von Gal asked her some of her clients if they would agree to allowing her to manage their lawns without any toxins. She found that many clients weren't even aware of how their lawns and landscapes were being managed - whether or not they were being sprayed, how often and with what - by the people they hired, although their vegetable gardens were organic.

"Honestly I never paid much attention to lawn, it wasn't high on my list of interesting things," laughed von Gal, "but what we realized is that after a year or so, it really worked. Nobody really noticed a difference and everybody was happy to try it, and when I told them what we were getting rid of, they were ecstatic."

Sean O'Neill, director of education and outreach for The Perfect Earth Project, put it this way: "It doesn't make much sense to walk across a chemical lawn to get to your organic tomato garden."

O'Neill, native to Farmingville, Long Island, grew up fishing with his grandfather every Sunday at Blue Point, became an avid fisherman, and holds a master's of science in environmental and natural resource economics from the University of Rhode Island (2006) and a bachelor's of science in natural resource management from the University of Delaware (2004). He worked for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation as a pesticide control specialist where he witnessed firsthand the dangers of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers as he visited properties to enforce pesticide laws.

While at NYSDEC, Sean created the 2011 Long Island Golf Course Initiative which led to the successful diversion of thousands of pounds of illegally manufactured "knock off" pesticides products from entering Long Island, and served as a technical adviser on the Long Island Pesticide Use Management Plan focusing on improved human health and water quality in response to the pesticide contamination of Long Island's vulnerable sole source drinking water aquifer.



Coupled with a personal desire to protect the environment, he jumped at the opportunity to work with von Gal and joined the team in April of 2014.

The goals of The Perfect Earth Project are to promote toxin-free land management for the benefit of human health and the environment, by helping people to understand the dangers of synthetic lawn and landscape chemicals especially for children and pets, and by educating homeowners and landscape professionals on how to use 'PRFCT' practices to achieve great results at no additional cost.

They accomplish this by offering low-cost seminars (\$10 to \$25) open to professionals, homeowners and community members interested in learning about non-toxic ways to manage land. The first seminar was held in February 2015 and attracted over 150 people, two-thirds of whom were professional landscapers and designers and the other third of whom were homeowners, said O'Neill.

"When people learn that they are affected by what others are putting into the environment we share, they get engaged on a personal level," he said. "Part of our success to date has been that personal touch where we can really show how this affects everybody. It's not a polar bear on an iceberg far away. It's right here in our communities." Opening conversations with people, sharing information, educating people and encouraging them to engage in trading stories are really important basic principles for von Gal and O'Neill.

"We're here to help people, to provide people with resources to create their own awareness and share it with others. We very much encourage people not to fire the people they're working with, but to convert them," she said. "We want our seminars to be pilot programs that can serve as models for anyone who wants to create their own training program. We hope to build a network of experts around the United States that people could call within their own communities, for help in choosing a non-toxic landscape."

Edwina Von Gal's work has been published in major publications and her book "Fresh Cuts" won the Quill and Trowel award for garden writing in 1998. She has served on boards and committees for a number of horticultural organizations, and is currently on the board of "What Is Missing," Maya Lin's multifaceted media artwork about the loss of biodiversity. She went to Panama in 2002 to design the park for the Biomuseo, the Frank Gehry designed museum of biodiversity under construction in Panama City, bought some land and stayed on to found the Azuero Earth Project with like-minded friends and scientists.

"The process convinced her to extend the toxin-free message to the United States, and Perfect Earth was launched in 2013 to promote toxin-free landscapes everywhere," she wrote on the organization's website. Since 2014, von Gal and O'Neill have engaged Paul Wagner, of the NY Soil Food Web, to serve as expert and as a speaker at their seminars. They are working collaboratively with the NOFA Organic Land Care Program to promote accredited professionals (see [www.perfectearthproject.org/toxin-free-landscaper-list](http://www.perfectearthproject.org/toxin-free-landscaper-list)) as well as Long Island landscapers offering non-toxic methods.

They're partnering with the Peconic Land Trust to address private horticultural management and to train future gardeners in least toxic methods. They have received a National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant and are working with Cornell Cooperative Extension to publish two versions of their landscape manual – one geared to landscape professionals and one to homeowners - already available as a text version on their website, [www.perfectearthproject.org/](http://www.perfectearthproject.org/).

They are also working not only with individual property owners, but with hospitals, college campuses, real estate developers and municipal parks and lands, to educate all involved about how possible it is to have a "perfectly aesthetically pleasing lawn and landscape without the use of cancer causing chemicals, or fertilizers that pollute our waterways and estuaries," said O'Neill, adding that on a personal note, he is thrilled that many of the landscapers he worked with over the years in his previous job are becoming interested in learning how to provide the services their clients are requesting.

"From a purely business standpoint, it's becoming imperative that landscapers learn how to do these things in order to make a living in the future."

Edwina von Gal emphasized that The Perfect Earth Project isn't working to reinvent something, but to "engage the existing infrastructure and create a big demand among the population of decision makers and land owners to insist on toxin-free maintenance and to understand that it doesn't need to cost more and that it is possible." "We're not doing advocacy," she said. "We feel we can meet our goals simply by creating a consciousness among people who are doing their own lawns or hiring someone to do their landscape." Underway is the "PRFCT Places" program, a registration service that recognizes and promotes toxin-free properties by

listing them on an interactive map and directory on the website. Von Gal encourages anyone who knows of a toxin-free property that would qualify to get in touch with her. The same goes for professional landscapers interested in registering their businesses as “PRFCT” to promote their services and products.

“We promote the idea and they can use our brand to promote their projects,” she said. “Since we ourselves cannot be in every community serving the United States, we feel this is our job, to create materials and packages that we can turn into easily replicable models that others can provide to their communities,” she said, encouraging land care professionals to contact her and share info on the challenges they face and how the Perfect Earth Project could help them. “We would love to create a whole army of ambassadors.”

Von Gal was appointed as a master teacher at the Conway School of Landscape Design for 2015-2016 and looks forward to further building awareness of eliminating toxins from maintenance programs and community projects. For more information, visit [www.perfectearthproject.org](http://www.perfectearthproject.org), or engage in social media on twitter, Facebook and instagram.