

Spring 1975

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Recommended Citation

Whitford, P.1975. Natural Landscaping Bill (AB 348). Field Station Bulletin 8(1): 5.

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NATURAL LANDSCAPING BILL (AB 348)

Native plants are making a comeback in Wisconsin, thanks to the growing number of homeowners who are switching to "natural landscaping". Many parks are also preserving or restoring areas with native plant communities, and the state highway department and some county departments are reducing mowing and spraying of road sides to encourage the return of native wildflowers, grasses and some shrubby species. Too often such efforts are stymied, however, by a municipal cutting ordinance or noxious weed list, and citizens are told to conform with the conventional clipped lawn aesthetics (an ecological wasteland) or the city will do it for them. In New Berlin a wildlife ecologist is going to court to challenge the constitutionality of such ordinances.

To try to remedy the situation short of going to court in every community, the Wisconsin Natural Beauty Council has introduced a bill which would exempt public or private landowners from cutting ordinances if their land is being managed as a "restoration project". The landowner would file a "management plan" with the governing body of his city, village or town. The plan would include a legal description of the managed lands, a general description of the types of plants or plant succession involved, and the management techniques being employed. The governing body could reject the plan if it were shown to be incomplete, if the owner was not adhering to the terms of the plan, or if the project were shown to create a condition hazardous to public health or safety. *The landowner would be exempt from a cutting ordinance only. Under no circumstances would a landowner be permitted to grow plants determined by the state to be noxious weeds.* (The noxious weeds included in the bill are Canada thistle, nodding or musk thistle, field bindweed, leafy spurge and, within the boundaries of any incorporated municipality, giant or common ragweed. The first four are agricultural pests and the ragweeds are health problems for hayfever sufferers.)

The impact of legalizing and, indeed, encouraging natural landscaping could be considerable: increased ecological balance and stability, creation of wildlife habitat, reduced erosion through better retention of rainwaters, reduced use of chemicals (fertilizers, weed killers), reduced noise and energy consumption (lawn mowers), gradual elimination of pesky weed species through natural plant succession, and an everchanging diversity and richness of color, texture and motion in the landscape are a few of the benefits.

The bill should come up for a vote in the Assembly soon. Help in contacting legislators is needed in all parts of the state. Please ask your state representative and senator to support this sensible means of restoring a touch of wildness in our lives, particularly in urban areas. *Ask your legislators to support Assembly Substitute Amendment 1 to Assembly Bill 348.* If you would like more information, contact Cindy Sampson, Program Coordinator, Wisconsin Natural Beauty Council, Box 450, Madison 53701 (608-266-7596).

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