

July 2018 Habitat Network e-newsletter from Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Nature Conservancy

The Nature Conservancy
Cornell Lab of Ornithology



Homeowner Associations (HOAs) & Wildlife Gardening

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- [Design Advice](#) [Healthy Ecosystems](#) [Homeowner Associations](#)

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 Wildlife gardening as a resident in a Homeowner Association (HOA) can require a bit of finesse for success. We've heard from many Habitat Network users, who are enthusiastic gardeners, asking for guidance on how to engage in gardening for wildlife while residing in a HOA. This was an exciting challenge that we transformed into an opportunity. An opportunity to provide hope and inspiration for those of you working to transform your landscapes in an era of HOAs.



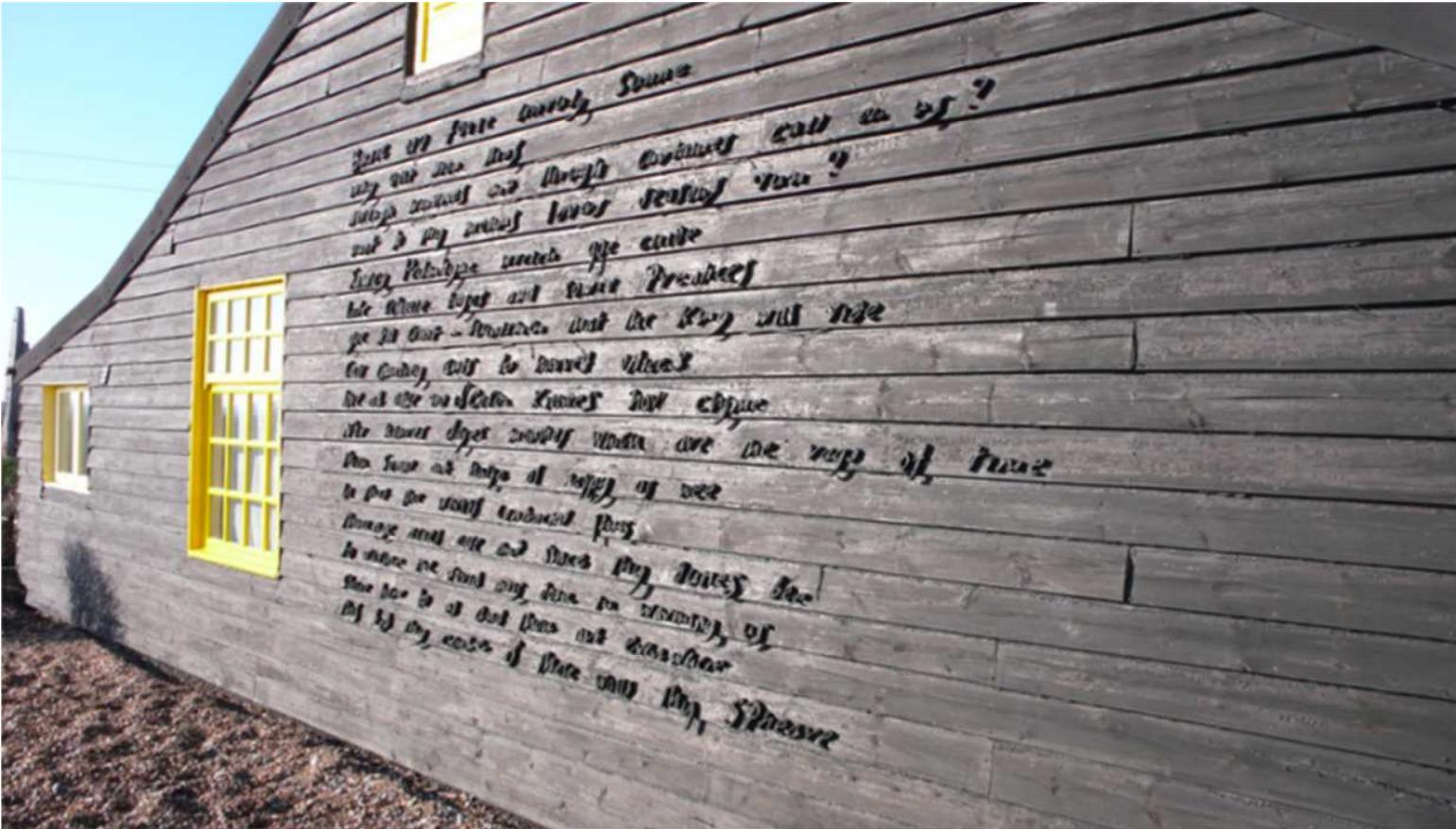
We hear you! Comments from Habitat Network Users regarding HOAs

HOAs are a growing phenomenon in the United States. Almost 70 million people currently reside in a HOA community, which is about 20% of the total population. And, this number is growing. Virtually all new housing developments in the United States, whether apartments, single-family subdivisions, multi-family homes, and gated and non-gated communities are a part of a HOA.



What sets HOAs apart from other private residential communities, aside from a monthly (or annual) membership fees used to maintain public spaces and infrastructure, is that they have specific rules

and regulations that all residents are expected to follow. These rules, generally found in the *Covenants, Conditions, and Restrictions* (CCR), vary but often relate to the aesthetic quality of property from the permitted color(s) of the houses to the height of the grass. These regulations are put in place to increase and maintain property values. In fact, properties within HOAs often have 17% higher property value.



As a resident, or someone considering becoming a resident in a HOA, we encourage you to *read the writing on the wall* and get to know as much as possible about how your HOA operates, the rules you are expected to follow (CCR), and the processes you will have to undertake in order to engage in the types of landscaping projects you are interested in. Below are some success stories from those who

have improved the habitat-quality in their HOA, despite the reputation such organizations have for pushing back against wildlife-friendly landscaping.



It is important to recognize that HOAs can, and in many examples, do provide excellent and biodiverse habitat. Research conducted in Phoenix, Arizona, comparing HOA to non-HOA

neighborhoods found that HOA communities had more plant diversity and could likewise support more biodiversity than non-HOA communities.

We hope some of these case studies provide ideas and guidance for those interested in implementing changes in the landscape management and sustainability practices in their HOA.



RESTON ASSOCIATION, RESTON, VIRGINIA

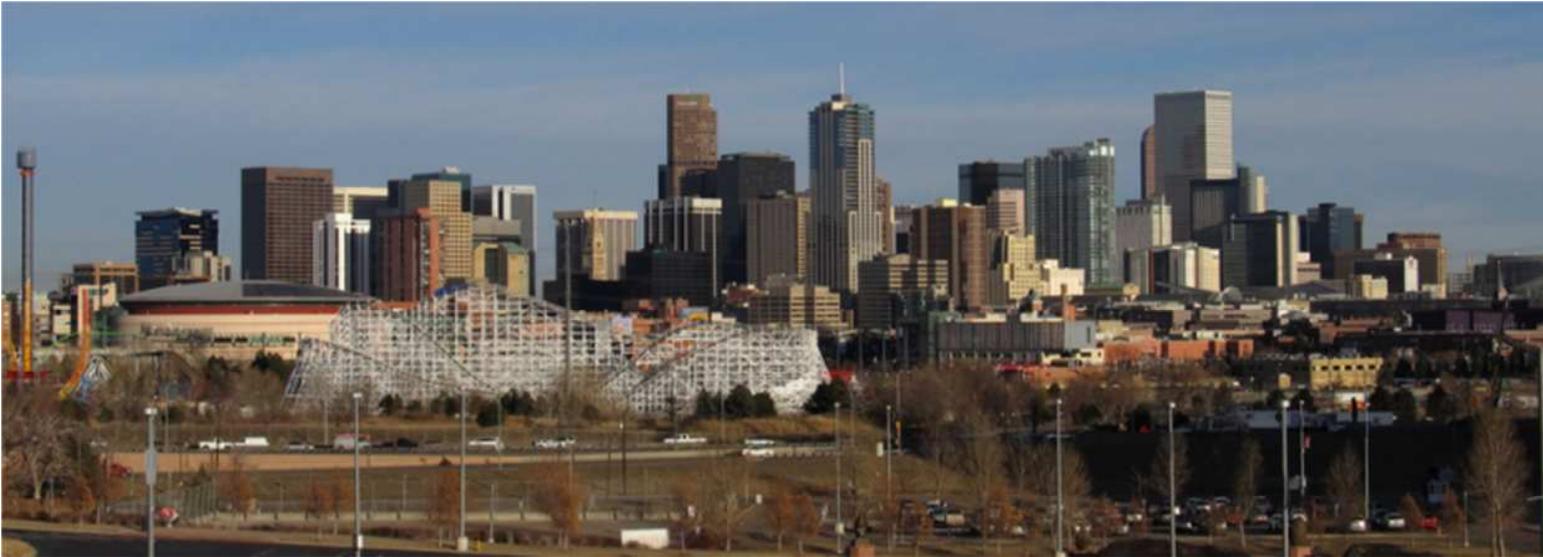
Reston Association, in Reston, Virginia, was created in the 1960s and is home to over 60,000 residents. The community was created with the intention of preserving open space. The HOA has over 1,300 acres of parklands and a managerial department that oversees 800 acres of natural open spaces. We spoke with Patricia Greenberg, the Environmental Resource Supervisor, who works with a team to manage the wildlands at Reston. They do everything from guiding residents on what native plants to consider to dealing with wildlife encounters and removing invasive species.



For those looking for examples of HOAs that preserve open, native, biodiverse spaces, Reston might be an excellent example to turn to. You might expect such well-run, high-quality 11 square miles of landscape to come with a hefty price tag, but the Reston membership fee of \$682 (\$56.83 a month) a year is lower than the average \$100-400 a month common across HOAs. This HOA demonstrates that higher fees may not always be associated with well-maintained green spaces.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM RESTON

1. Research HOAs before making a decision, there may be one that has a philosophy of open, natural space that resonates with your values.
2. Consider pushing back on HOAs that claim more money is required to create native, open landscape for wildlife.



CHERRY CREEK 3, DENVER, COLORADO

Using a *backdoor* approach for change may be an effective route in some HOAs. A great success story of this comes from Don Ireland, board president of Cherry Creek 3 HOA in Colorado.

In 2008, Don was a resident of Cherry Creek 3 in Denver, Colorado. He noticed that water & sewage bills were rising, eating up 42% of Cherry Creek 3's budget, and causing increases in annual

homeowner fees. He decided to do some research and made a proposal to the association board to consider a “toilet project”. Joining with local organization, Denver Water, a rebate was offered to replace old 3.5 gallon-per-flush model toilets in privately-owned condos with more efficient 1.28-gpf models. The first effort worked, 425 toilets were replaced and Cherry Creek 3 saved a couple million gallons of water in the first year, which substantially reduced HOA water-sewer costs.



This *backdoor* effort to save water led to wildlife gardening. Soon Don was voted in as the board president and he continued to advocate for lowering water bills. The dialog shifted to landscaping and the community began to transform private and public spaces, dominated by lava rocks and juniper shrubs (left), into water-wise xeriscape areas (right). The xeriscape project started in 2009 with a goal of transforming 50 homes a year over the next five years. By the 2014 fiscal year, Cherry Creek 3 had decreased water consumption from its 2008-09 peak of 36.7 million gallons annually to 20.8 million— a drop of 15+ million gallons



By focusing on an economic issue of saving money through water conservation, Cherry Creek 3 is being transformed into a biodiverse HOA. Water-wise, pollinator-friendly gardens, instead of dying shrubs have replaced sections of common Kentucky bluegrass areas. Pictured above is a shade-providing native shrub garden outside the association's pool just after planting (left) and once the shrubs have matured (right). Cherry Creek 3 has won awards from water-conservation and nature

organizations, becoming the first Colorado HOA to receive awards from the State of Colorado, Audubon Rockies, Plant Select and Colorado WaterWise.



In Colorado, the state legislature changed its laws in 2005, prohibiting HOAs from requiring homeowners to use only turf lawns in front of individual homes. The measure enables individuals and HOAs to use more water-conserving, nature-and-pollinator friendly plants.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CHERRY CREEK 3

- 1. Know your HOA budget and consider a *backdoor approach* relevant to your ecoregion, that will both save money and result in more sustainable practices.**
- 2. Get involved with the board, Don was a resident and thru his efforts he became the association's board president.**
- 3. Network with other local organizations or companies that may be able to assist or incentivize projects. Cherry Creek 3 successfully partnered with their local water company, Denver Water.**



SHARON PARK, MENLO PARK, CALIFORNIA

Sharon Park HOA partnered with [Gachina Landscape Management](#), which specializes in sustainable landscaping to create public garden spaces that support birds, bees, butterflies, and other wildlife by

providing food, water, and shelter. This HOA is a certified Garden for Wildlife from the National Wildlife Federation.



Led by HOA resident advocates, community parks and green public spaces were converted into water-wise gardens with bird baths, native flowers, shrubs, and trees. These improvements were seen not only as beneficiary to wildlife, but also to the residents who recreate and stroll through the life-filled gardens. The landscaping efforts of this HOA are seen as beneficial to all involved.

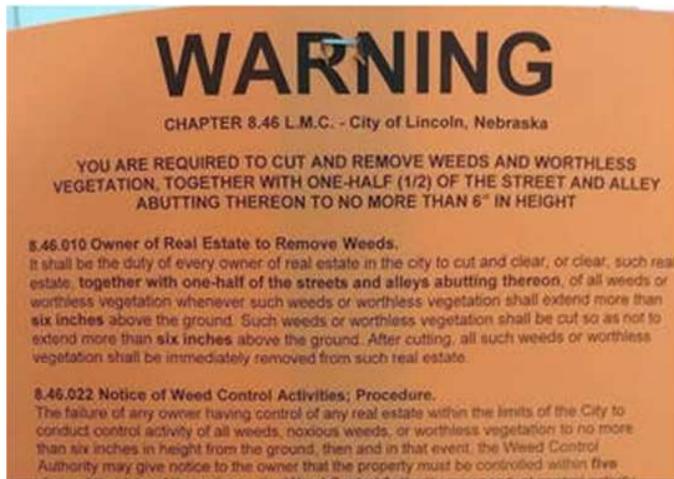
LESSONS LEARNED FROM SHARON PARK

- 1. Partnerships are important. Efforts are sometimes taken more seriously when other organizations get involved.**
- 2. Interest sometimes needs to bubble up from the current residents of the HOA. Become involved, attend meetings, and share your ideas!**
- 3. Residents have a lot to gain and enjoy from creating more wildlife habitat.**



BENJAMIN VOGT, LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

A final example comes from Benjamin Vogt, native landscape designer, who lives in a HOA in Nebraska and is an inspiration for anyone looking to transform their landscape into wildlife habitat despite a HOA that, at first, appears to disagree.



Benjamin has been cited twice for wildlife landscaping. The most recent citation was in May of this year where he was told he needed to cut down the meadow in his backyard. This meadow, mind you, had been a work in progress since 2015 and was an intentional habitat space filled with native grasses and flowers—not *worthless vegetation* as implied by the citation.



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Thus, Benjamin submitted a *plant list* to the local *weed superintendent* explaining his intentional work. Soon thereafter, the superintendent arrived to inspect his yard. The inspectors major concern was that Benjamin's yard was a *fire risk and attracted rodents*.



After some initial tension, the superintendent and Benjamin were able to engage in a friendly exchange where both sides were able to share their insights. Benjamin learned how to navigate

ordinances and how to make a valid argument for intentional wildlife landscaping and the superintendent learned that spaces some people may view as *wild, messy, rodent/fire* risk, are actually spaces that are incredibly valuable habitat with minimal risk of supporting rodents or fueling fires.



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Benjamin does a nice job summarizing his specific recommendations for people who are challenged by HOA restrictions in this article he wrote. Many of his landscaping recommendations we highlight in our Making 'Messy' Look Good article and the Wildlife Value of a Messy Garden.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM BENJAMIN VOGT'S EXPERIENCE

1. **There is power in creating relationships and talking to people. Moments of conflict can be turned into opportunities for *official* dialogue about what counts as valid landscaping if you are armed with some science.**
2. **Keep plant lists and practice Making Messy Look Good practices to signal that your landscape is intentional and managed.**
3. **Put-up signs, such as Garden for Wildlife or Monarch Watch, to communicate to others why you have wildlife habitat.**



As each of these case studies demonstrate, there is no single answer to how to create habitat in a HOA, **instead there are MANY!** It is easy to get stuck behind rules, regulations, and the expectations of our lawn-loving neighbors, but there are real and powerful ways we can work around

these restrictions to provide green spaces that are economical, beautiful, well-kept, and beneficial to all life.



If you live in a HOA and want to implement change, consider starting to dig-deep into your *Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions* (CCR), to inform yourself. Once you are empowered with information, attend a meeting, talk to people, think creatively about how you can take your vision and work with your community, and its values and concerns, to enact change. There are numerous success stories. Can you make your HOA the next wildlife-friendly community?