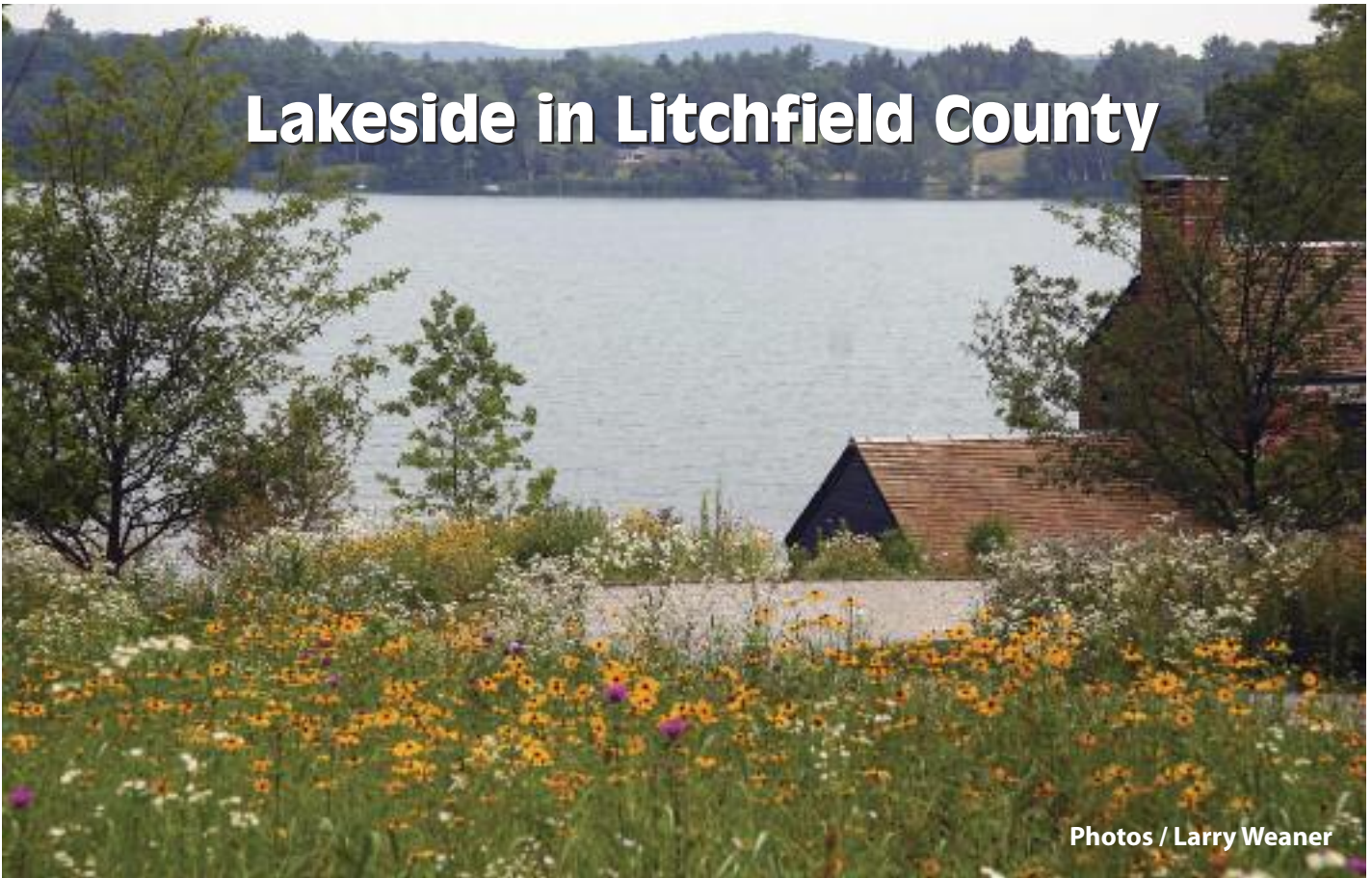


# Lakeside in Litchfield County



Photos / Larry Weaner

By Tom Christopher

“There’s a little bit of a push-me, pull-you between us,” Elizabeth Glazer explains, gesturing toward her husband, Bill Montgomery. “The difference between having land that looks wild,” her preference, “and land that looks very well tended,” his. They’ve arrived at a compromise in their home in northwest Connecticut, and the tension between wild and domesticated, juxtaposed, gives this landscape a special vitality.

This site itself is dramatic: a narrow rectangle of 2.5 steeply sloping acres running down from the road to the shore of a scenic lake.

It also presented difficulties from a design perspective: the driveway zig-zagged back and forth across the slope, and storm water runoff would, unless diverted, pour down directly into the lake, taking its load of pollutants with it. In addition, the soil was a dense clay, a fertile soil but one that would be easily compacted by the machinery brought in to construct the house.

The contractors’ response was to

clothe the site in turf, a solution which landscape architect Jamie Purinton, a specialist in sustainable design, found unsatisfactory both environmentally and aesthetically.

Turf retains and absorbs runoff poorly and requires chemicals for its maintenance that would end up in the lake. A lush, native vegetative cover, by contrast, would act as a sponge to soak up excess water, and could flourish without chemical inputs. To reconcile this with the owners’ divergent tastes was the challenge.

## The Biofilter

Managing storm water runoff with its potential for pollution was an important concern on this lake-side site. Aside from replacing the lawns with meadows, landscape architect Jamie Purinton also created a biofilter to cleanse the runoff from the house’s roof before it reached the lake.

After excavating a shallow swale, she lined it with native wetland plants such as swamp maple (*Acer rubrum*) and eastern larch (*Larix laricina*), and shrub dogwoods such as *Cornus race-*

*mosa* (gray dogwood) and *Cornus sericea* (redosier dogwood).

Ornamental as well as functional, the biofilter also includes many flowering shrubs such as buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*) and meadowleaf spirea (*Spiraea alba*); herbaceous perennials such as Joe Pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*) and cup plant (*Silphium perfoliatum*); and fruiting bushes such as winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) and cranberrybush viburnum (*Viburnum trilobum*) to furnish fall and winter interest as well as food for wildlife. Early spring brings blossoms on pussy willows (*Salix discolor*) and blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*). This is truly a planting for four seasons.

The concept that Purinton came up with was to present the clients with a handsome counterpoint. Bill Montgomery got his domesticated areas – a vegetable and fruit garden, a rose garden, shrub borders, even a sculptural laundry line on which to dry swimmers’ towels. But all were to be inset into a complex of meadows which would appeal to Elizabeth Glazer’s less

formal tastes.

Glazer admits now that she required a bit of education when it came to meadows. What she initially envisioned was a Monet-esque landscape of waving grasses studded with scarlet poppies. What she and her husband got was considerably more complex, both ecologically and visually.

To design the meadows Purinton brought in a specialist, ecological designer Larry Weaner. Weaner's skill is to analyze the site – the topography and location, the soil, whatever existing native vegetation there is, and then provide a community of plants that can exist there naturally.

This required developing different mixtures of vegetation to suit different conditions on the site; the wetter soil on the edge of the lake, for example, required a blend of more moisture-tolerant plants, whereas the more upland areas needed more drought tolerant blends.

In addition, Weaner had to be sensitive to the aesthetic needs of the project. For example, Purinton had hired virtuoso mason Andy Savage to manage the changes in grade with beautifully crafted stone retaining walls. To avoid burying these with the planting, Weaner designed the corresponding meadows to include only short grasses and flowers.

### Filling All the Niches

A keynote of Larry Weaner's meadow design is to fill all the ecological niches. This is essential to shutting out invasive species; if a niche within the landscape is left vacant, something will find its way in, and the chances are that the invader will be something aggressive and undesirable.

Niches can be spatial. A meadow, for instance, should include both ground-covering plants and taller plants that form a light-blocking canopy. There are also subterranean niches, the spaces within the soil. A properly planned meadow should include not only deep-rooted plants but also more shallow, fibrous-rooted plants, so that all the soil is occupied and no space is left for invasives.

*continued on next page*



Photo / Jamie Purinton





There are also niches within time. Weaner includes fast-growing flowers in his meadow seed mixes, plants that occupy the ground rapidly so that it isn't left vulnerable to colonization by weeds. Such plants, by their nature, persist only for a season or two, however, and the meadow designer must also include seeds of the plants that will succeed them. Weaner also incorporates into his seed mixes biennials and short-lived, fast-growing perennials, as well as slower-growing but more persistent perennials that may take several years to take hold but which provide coverage for the long term.

What most fascinates the owners of the garden is its changeability, the way in which it is continually evolving.

It has been seven years since the meadows were installed, partly by seed mix and partly in young plants (nursery plugs). The initial results were not impressive, Elizabeth Glazer recalls. "Larry warned us, 'You will hate me the first year.'" And in fact, the meadow planting appeared to Elizabeth and Bill to be just a weedy mess then, until Larry took them on a tour and showed them all the desirable seedlings that were springing up.

### Seed versus Plants

Both seeds and plants have their place in Weaner's meadow programs. Seed mixes tailored to the site and to the clients' needs and taste provide an economical means of planting large areas. By combining seed of biennials with that of short-lived and longer-lived perennials, a seed mix can also provide for several generations of growth within the meadow. Finally, a diverse seed mix

enables the variations within the site to express themselves as some ingredients of the seed mix flourish in one area while other ingredients perform best in another.

Including container-grown plants in the meadow planting scheme will help to satisfy clients' desire for quicker results – such plantings mature within a year or two rather than in the multi-year time frame of a seed-sown meadow.

Starting with plants also allows a greater degree of control of the meadow's ultimate composition. Where a particular color or effect was wanted in the Glazer-Montgomery garden, Weaner installed plants, typically the "deep-root plugs," small plants sold by the tray, which combine superior survival with relatively low cost.

Since then, the meadow has closed ranks, leaving little room for weeds, though it still requires an occasional going over to remove invasives such as thistle. The care, according to Bill Montgomery, is far less than for a comparable space of more formal garden and the rewards in terms of bloom are remarkable.

"The process," recalls Montgomery, "has been quite entertaining, because the meadows change every year." In part this is a function of the maturation of the planting, with the more durable perennials gradually taking over. It's also a response to weather, with some plants assuming a large presence during wet or dry years. Microclimates within the yard and variations of topography also express themselves through differences in the fabric of the meadows.

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**Jamie Purinton** has practiced landscape architecture for more than 20 years; written two books, *Voices of the Land* and *Landscape Narratives: Design Practices for Telling Stories*; and taught landscape architecture at City College and Cornell University. Her Hudson Valley-based practice focuses on sustainable design, minimizing our impact on the land and making distinct and meaningful places. [jamiipurinton.com](http://jamiipurinton.com)

**Larry Weaner** has more than 30 years of landscape design and installation experience, combining expertise in horticulture, environmental science, and the traditions of garden design. He is the author of *Garden Revolution: How Our Landscapes Can Be a Source of Environmental Change*, co-authored with Tom Christopher. [lweanerasociates.com](http://lweanerasociates.com)

adds Elizabeth Glazer, but ultimately, “You get what the land will provide,” she notes.

That’s part of the pleasure, Montgomery says, the constant surprises. The bloom also changes as the season progresses. “It’s endlessly entertaining ... because overnight the look of the meadow can change ... it’s a new meadow every couple of weeks.”

As the meadow evolves, it has prompted the more formal areas of the garden to do the same, and along parallel lines.

In the spring of this year (2016) Purinton renewed the perennial plantings in the domesticated areas of the garden to reflect what had risen to prominence in the meadows.

Beds were consolidated to make a single, bolder statement that better complements the bold sweep of the meadow grasses and flowers. Colors drawn from the meadow flowers were emphasized in the formal beds. Deep purples, oranges and orangey-reds were inserted into the plantings around a terrace of brick and bluestone; a color palette of salmons, purples, pinks and chartreuse was emphasized to the west of the house.

“Push-me, pull-you.” Full of butterflies, birds and dragonflies, this garden provides a model for a different, more dynamic kind of landscape. The choice between naturalistic and formal isn’t either/or here. Instead, in this lakeside landscape the two dance together, in intimate embrace. ❁

Garden writer and horticulturist Thomas Christopher recently co-authored *Garden Revolution* with Larry Weaner.

A graduate of the New York Botanical Garden School of Professional Horticulture, he has written for numerous publications including *The New York Times* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, and has served as a contributing editor to *Martha Stewart Living*.



**Tom Christopher**

## Some of the Pollinators Attracted to the Meadows



1



2



3



4



5



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Photos / Dr. Conrad Vispo, Farmscape Ecology Program ([hvfarmscape.org](http://hvfarmscape.org))

1. Bronze Copper (*Lycaena hyllus*), a butterfly native to the northeastern quarter of the U.S.
2. Viceroy (*Limenitis archippus*), a butterfly native to most of North America and parts of Canada and Mexico.
3. The Calico pennant (*Celithemis elisa*), a dragonfly native to eastern Canada and the eastern U.S.
4. Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*), a butterfly native to the eastern U.S.
5. Pearl Crescent (*Phyciodes tharos*), a butterfly native to the eastern U.S.
6. The Buckeye (*Junonia coenia*), a butterfly native to the U.S. and parts of Canada.