

Featured in Washington Gardener Magazine

Washington Gardener magazine featured my sister, Janet Crouch, in its August 2022 edition. Click on the PDF to read the full interview. Learn more about how Janet and her husband, Jeff, saved their wildlife garden from the clutches of an overreaching HOA—and got a state law passed in the process—in these articles on The Humane Gardener website: [“Butterflies: 1; Bullies: 0.”](#) and [“Busting the Property Values Myth.”](#)



A homeowners association, or HOA, is a private entity that markets, sells, and manages homes in a residential subdivision. HOAs make rules about subletting homes, what vehicles can be parked where, trash pick-up, storage, and more. They are also responsible for the visual appeal of a neighborhood, making them very invested in landscaping. Often, HOAs will advocate for and enforce the use of turf lawns despite the harm such lawns do to the environment. For passionate and environmentally conscious Maryland gardener Janet Crouch and her pollinator garden, this wasn't going to stand.

What is your background and are you native to this area?

I am a life-long Maryland resident, having grown up in Bowie and lived in Howard County for over 30 years. I have been surrounded by beautiful gardens and discussions about plants and flowers for as long as I can remember. Both of my parents received degrees in floriculture and my father, Roger Lawson, earned a doctorate in plant pathology and worked at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, where he directed the florist and nursery crops laboratory and served as a national

program leader. Our garden in Bowie reflected my dad's passion for flowers and landscape design.

After moving into our own home many years ago, my husband and I began to plant a garden and have been greatly influenced by my sister, Nancy Lawson, author of *The Humane Gardener*. We are drawn to the basic tenets of gardening with native plants, understanding that we have an opportunity to support flora and fauna with the choices we make in our yard. Given the opportunity to not only benefit pollinators, provide food and shelter for wildlife, and positively contribute to the environment, we have chosen to garden in an environmentally friendly manner with mostly native plants for the last 20 years.

Can you explain the issue you had with your homeowners association? What motivated you to fight back?

We have nurtured an environmentally friendly garden in Beech Creek, a Columbia outparcel (not part of the Columbia Association) since approximately 2004.

Our garden's footprint had been in place for over a decade when the Beech Creek Homeowners

Association's hired law firm sent us a "Notice to Cease and Desist" letter demanding that we replace our entire garden with grass in 2017. We fought back because we believed that the HOA board was abusing its authority, not following the HOA architectural guidelines, and treating us differently from other neighbors.

In bullying letters and court documents, the HOA's lawyer wrote that gardens with plants that help birds, butterflies, and other pollinators do not belong in our community or in any planned community. Even though we pointed out that this was untrue and that the nearby Columbia Association promotes eco-friendly pollinator gardening and that such gardens are found throughout Columbia, the Beech Creek HOA dismissed us and required that our garden be replaced with grass.

After nearly two years of living under the threat of having our garden destroyed, we filed suit against the Beech Creek HOA in August 2019. We feel very fortunate to have worked with Jeff Kahntroff of Skipper Law, the only law firm in the area dedicated to helping defend homeowners against HOAs. Jeff's understanding of the law, as well as HOA tactics used against homeowners, were invaluable in helping us through this process.

Through our lawsuit, we learned that this all started because of the complaint of one neighbor. The HOA had ignored him until he began using his work title and .gov email—for his high-level assistant inspector general for Investigations, Legal Services Corporation position—in his communications pushing for replacement of our garden with turf grass.

What was the resolution of that fight?

After three long years and over \$60,000, we settled our case in December 2020 and were able to retain virtually all of our garden as long as it was set back a few feet. The HOA spent approximately \$100,000 on attorney fees in this matter without even making the community aware of their activities.

Around the time we filed our lawsuit, my husband and I began attending environmental events in our community and meeting our state legislators. Our