

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

# ‘Why Do You Still Have Lightning Bugs? Ours Are All Gone.’

April 17, 2023 5 MIN READ



The Asahi Shimbun, via Getty Images

Give this article



564

**By Margaret Renkl**

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

NASHVILLE — The day we moved into this house, 28 years ago next month, a thunderstorm knocked out the power late in the day. My husband was returning the rental van. Our 3-year-old was safely tucked into his old bed in his new room. As night began to fall in the silent house, I sat down on the sofa to cry.

At a routine appointment earlier in the day, I’d learned that the baby I was carrying had no heartbeat. There had been a heartbeat once, but there was no heartbeat now. All I could do was wait for my body — still puffy and tender, still so sensitive to the smell of any kind of food — to catch up. For 10 weeks I had been growing a new life. Suddenly I wasn’t growing anything at all. My body just didn’t know it yet.

Surrendering to tears after a day like that feels like a gift, but the real gift is what happened while I wept. As darkness gathered under the maple trees in our new yard, tiny lights began to wink on and off just above the ground. I got up from the sofa to look. Just beyond the picture window, there were hundreds of lights, thousands of lights, lifting up from the damp grass and rising into the black branches. Lightning bugs!

Thinking back on that moment of magic, I cannot honestly say I took those fireflies for a sign, some kind of light-in-the-darkness metaphor, although the fact that I still remember them all these years later must mean that’s what they became to me. At the time, my heart simply filled up with the beauty of a darkness bedazzled by tiny, wavering shards of light.

[We’ve lost a few trees](#) here over the decades, and our neighborhood has lost uncountably more. But there are still many trees in this yard. Every year we plant new saplings, and together the trees, old and young, make a sanctuary for us all, humans and lightning bugs alike. We leave the leaves where they fall, and the leaves offer still more shelter for insects under the sheltering trees. There are fewer insects now anyway, despite my best efforts, but as spring gives way to summer, lightning bugs still rise up from our yard, blinking in the last light of day.

That’s not true in most of the nearby yards because in those yards my neighbors have hired a mosquito-control service to fog their trees and shrubs with poison. They have hired a yard service to sow their grass and the soil of their flower beds with other poisons. In most cases, my neighbors have no idea that they’ve signed a death warrant for nearly every insect in their yards. They have fallen for extermination company ads claiming to be “eco-friendly” or “all organic.” I know of one company that even claims to spare the so-called beneficial insects, though that’s impossible: A poison meant to kill invertebrates will kill every invertebrate in the yard.

Nowadays, most people are so divorced from the natural world that it doesn’t occur to them to question these lies. Sometimes when I’m out walking the dog, a neighbor will stop me and ask, truly curious, “Why do you have still lightning bugs? Ours are all gone.”

Firefly populations have dropped alarmingly, and [it’s mostly our fault](#). Light pollution interrupts the flash patterns that fireflies use to communicate, making it more difficult to find a mate and evade predators. Development means the loss of the leaf litter and fallen branches and high grass that make up firefly habitat.

Add pesticides to all those depredations, and what you end up with is a world bereft of lightning bugs — and nearly every other kind of insect and wildflower — simply because it’s fashionable to have yards that look like putt-putt courses on the Miracle Strip and patios that serve as extensions of the living room: climate-controlled, bug-controlled, artificial in every way.

I honestly don’t get it. Isn’t *escaping* expectations of tidiness and order a big reason we go outside in the first place? And isn’t wildness something we hope to encounter when we get there? How on earth could an ecological dead zone possibly seem prettier than a tangle of wildflowers populated by beautiful and fascinating insects? And by the manifold creatures — bats and birds and mammals, reptiles and amphibians — who survive by eating those bugs?

Mosquitoes play a crucial role in this ecosystem, but it’s definitely more pleasant to spend time outdoors if you are not serving as part of the food web yourself. Fortunately, mosquitoes can’t fly in wind, and an oscillating fan can keep them away without killing them and everything else. Mosquitoes, which do not venture far from home, also can’t reproduce without standing water. To keep your yard more or less mosquito-free, just eliminate all other sources of standing water and build a “[mosquito bucket of doom](#)” to trick mosquitoes into laying eggs in water where their larvae cannot survive.

We don’t have an easy answer yet for how to feed the world without chemical fertilizers and poisons, but taking a live-and-let-live approach to the yard — or the city park, or the apartment balcony or the public roadsides — is easy. It also frees up time and money, lowers our own carbon footprint and increases ecosystem biodiversity, all while reducing our own exposure to the health risks of environmental poisons.

A couple of weekends ago, I was looking for a peony to give my brother for his birthday. Peonies aren’t native to the American South, and they feed none of our wild neighbors, so I consider them a waste of garden space. But they are Billy’s favorites. And since he had just spent an entire year making the artworks that will accompany the essays in my next book — nearly every one of which involved some version of the question “Is this a native plant?” or “Is this a native bird?” or “Is this a native bug?” — I figured a peony would be the kind of gift he would recognize as more than just a celebration of his birth. A peony would say, “There is room in this world for your flowers and for mine.”

But at the nursery, none of the peonies were in bloom. How was I to choose one not knowing what its flower would look like?

Then, at the very back of the enormous peony section, I spied a plant with a bloom emerging from its center — a flower that was not a peony. Owing to some miracle of haphazard poison application, a tall stalk of butterweed emerged from the center of the peony plant. And tucked under the plant’s leaves was a bit of American speedwell, too. The speedwell wasn’t blooming yet, but the butterweed boasted a spray of those glorious yellow flowers that I love with all my heart. These wildflowers had somehow found the one pot in the entire nursery with soil that hadn’t been treated with a pre-emergent poison to keep weed seeds from germinating.

And that’s the best part, the most joyful, heart-lifting truth about what happens when we make even a little space for the natural world to live safely in the built landscape: Wildness stands ready to move right in as soon as we get out of the way.

Margaret Renkl, a contributing Opinion writer, is the author of the books “[Graceland at Last](#)” and “[Late Migrations](#).” Her new book, “[The Comfort of Crows: A Backyard Year](#),” will appear in October.

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We’d like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here’s our email: [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on [Facebook](#), [Twitter \(@NYTopinion\)](#) and [Instagram](#).