



# On Blue Lake, a Light Touch Keeps the **Landscape Wild**

BY TOM SPRINGER      PHOTOS BY MARK BUGNASKI

Very few people in Michigan (pop. 9.8 million) have visited as many inland lakes as Howard Wandell. For a limnologist, that comes with the territory. Howard spent a long career with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), crisscrossing the state to help landowners improve their lakes' environmental health.

So, given his vast experience, what does Howard do to manage his own waterfront property? Well ... nothing. Or at least, as little as humanly necessary.

"If you put away the lawnmower, and let nature do its thing, it can be easy. You really don't need to work that hard," he says. "I do very little maintenance, except



rake plants out of our little beach, so the kids can swim and we can get our rowboat in and out.”

Of course, Howard can get away with no lawn mower because he has no lawn. He and his wife, Kyoko, live in a home on Blue Lake, in the Manistee National Forest. In backwoods fashion, it was a “basement house” when the Wandells bought it 35 years ago. The first owner planned to live in the basement until she built the upper level, but it was the Wandells who finished the construction.

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The first owner also left most of the lot’s native vegetation intact – which was fine with the Wandells. Other than pruning limbs, or cutting a tree that might fall on the house, they’ve taken a hands-off approach to the landscape. And it shows. On a summer afternoon their grey-sided home glows hazy green in the diffused light that filters through the big pines and hardwoods overhead. There’s an almost monastic serenity to the place, its human impact reduced to a few essentials: a demure dwelling in the woods; a modest footpath to a small beach; a no-frills rowboat, powered by oars, that’s tethered to a wooden dock.

Given what was already there, the Wandell’s woodsy cottage may not seem like a noteworthy example of native lakescaping. They didn’t need to rebuild an eroded shoreline, tear out a seawall, or scrape off turf and bring in a truck load of native plants.

Yet it’s precisely what the Wandells haven’t done that’s worthy of attention. Across the Upper Midwest, there are still hundreds of semi-wild places like Blue Lake that face more development pressure each year. How and what homeowners build there will affect their ecology for generations to come. And even on developed lakes there are often a few wild parcels – little arks of habitat, with woody debris along the shore where turtles and dragonflies doze in the sun – that deserve protection.







*“So lovely was the loneliness  
of a wild lake.”* – EDGAR ALLAN POE

To that point, Howard tells a story from his DNR days about a lake he visited in southeast Michigan.

“It was almost completely developed. From the shore, I saw only one small, natural lot still standing,” he recalled. “Then a guy from the lake association says, ‘Boy, I wish we could get that owner to sell. We’d really like to ‘clean’ that lot up!’ Here it was, the last natural remnant, and all they could think to do was get rid of it!”

Yet across the Midwest, lake associations do function as a positive force for conservation. At Blue Lake, the association oversees the control of aquatic invasive plants. They use a selective herbicide that kills only invasives such as Eurasian milfoil and curly-leaf pondweed. They also enforce a quiet lake designation, which limits boat motors to 10 horsepower.

Ever the limnologist, Howard still uses his knowledge for the public good. He’ll lower his black and white Secchi disk into the depths to monitor Blue Lake’s water clarity. He can still see the disk at 30 feet – a high score for an inland lake.



"As I've told the Blue Lake Association, 'ladies and gentlemen, you've got a gold mine here, don't lose it!' Howard says. For the most part, his neighbors have agreed. As a classic "Up North" lake, steeped in generations of outdoor family memories, the residents seem unwilling to turn their loon and lily-pad paradise into a clone of the 'cleaned up' suburban lakes they see down state.

And, much as he'll use a Secchi disk to gauge water quality, Howard also has a rule of thumb to measure how residents treat their lakefront.

"There are three kinds of views for a lake house," he says. "The first is Wide Open – cut down all the trees for a clear view of the lake." This suburban approach often features a full lawn that runs down to a seawall.

"The second kind," Howard says, "is the Tunnel View, where you leave most trees, but remove and trim some for a narrow view of the lake." About 75 percent of Blue Lake properties look like this.







## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Then, there's the Wandell way: The Filtered View. They've left nearly every tree standing, and trimmed just enough limbs for the canopy to cast a dappled shade on the ground below. From their house, the lake shimmers away in the distance as it might from a canoe portage trail in Canada. "It gives you a feeling of solitude, even though you're on a lake with lots of people on it," Howard says.

At a place so endowed with natural beauty, the Wandells need little in the way of human diversions. They'll stand motionless on the dock for 10 minutes rather than startle a hummingbird as it sips nectar from a purple pickerel weed flower. They'll watch loons dive and study bullfrogs. For exercise, Kyoko rows the boat while Howard swims the six-tenths of a mile across the lake and back.

"The Norwegians have two sayings," Howard says, "'There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes,' and more importantly, 'To live is to be outside.'"

- On undeveloped waterfront, 'First, do no harm.' Before you cut or remove anything, take inventory of the native plants and trees that are already there.
- Look for any terrain between the house and lake that will be prone to erosion. Design your walkways to protect such places.
- Serve on your lake association as a friendly advocate for native shoreline habitat.
- Shrubs growing along your property boundaries and shoreline create privacy and serenity.
- Don't forget the value of near-shore woody debris, such as down logs or aquatic shrubs, which are havens for fish and wildlife.





# Learn More

Want to learn more about how you can benefit your lake through a project on your property? Check out the resources below in your state.

## ILLINOIS

Program: Illinois Nonpoint Source Management  
Website: [www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/water-quality/watershed-management/nonpoint-sources/Pages/default.aspx](http://www2.illinois.gov/epa/topics/water-quality/watershed-management/nonpoint-sources/Pages/default.aspx)

## INDIANA

Program: Lake and River Enhancement Program  
Website: [www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/2364.htm](http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/2364.htm)

## IOWA

Contact the Iowa Department of Natural Resources  
District Fisheries Biologist for your area:  
Spirit Lake District - **712-336-1840**  
Clear Lake District **641-357-3517**  
Black Hawk Lake District **712-657-2638**

## MICHIGAN

Program: Michigan Natural Shoreline Partnership  
Website: [www.mishorelinepartnership.org](http://www.mishorelinepartnership.org)

## MINNESOTA

Program: Restore your Shore  
Website: [www.dnr.state.mn.us/rys](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/rys)

## NORTH DAKOTA

Program: Save Our Lakes Program  
Website: [gf.nd.gov/plots/landowner/sol](http://gf.nd.gov/plots/landowner/sol)

Program: Watershed Management Program  
Website: [deq.nd.gov/WQ/3\\_Watershed\\_Mgmt/1\\_NPS\\_Mgmt/NPS.aspx](http://deq.nd.gov/WQ/3_Watershed_Mgmt/1_NPS_Mgmt/NPS.aspx)

## SOUTH DAKOTA

Contact: Jason Jungwirth, **605-223-7610**  
[Jason.Jungwirth@state.sd.us](mailto:Jason.Jungwirth@state.sd.us)

## WISCONSIN

Program: Wisconsin Healthy Lakes Program  
Website: [www.Healthylakeswi.com](http://www.Healthylakeswi.com)

