



Stories that aren't tales

Nature Narratives

LIVING WITH REEDS

How a Belgian Garden Shows the Power
of Nature



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In the village of Damme just outside Brugge in Belgium, surrounded by open fields and fading farms, something remarkable is quietly happening. Behind the home of Stefaan Deraeve and Katrien Steeman, a patch of reeds sways gently in the wind.

On the surface, it may seem ordinary, but these reeds are part of a natural system. It purifies household wastewater, nurtures the garden, and demonstrates a simple truth: working with nature can transform daily life. This is the story of one man, a small ecosystem, and what can happen when curiosity meets observation, patience, and care.



Reeds forming a natural system for household wastewater purification

Discovering a New Way to Live

When Stefaan and Katrien first moved to Damme, the village was still dotted with small family farms. Over the years, most of these farms disappeared, replaced by industrial machinery and sprawling fields. While the water itself had not visibly worsened, Stefaan noticed a subtle but important change: people were growing distant from the land. The rhythms of soil, water, and plants once central to daily life were vanishing from view. The household water also needed purification, as it was not yet connected to the sewage system.

It was this quiet awareness that led him to explore alternative solutions. At a workshop on wastewater management, Stefaan discovered the reed bed system. Simple in principle, it uses reeds and natural processes to clean wastewater. No chemicals, no complex machinery, just a living system that adjusts itself over time. For Stefaan, it wasn't just a technical fix; it was a way to reconnect his household with nature.



Building a Self-Sustaining System

Stefaan installed the reed bed in his garden and connected it to solar panels creating a self-sustaining setup. Over time, he witnessed the system's quiet efficiency. The water that passed through the reeds became clean enough to water his garden. When the household shrank from six people to three, the system adapted naturally. Less water meant slower growth, but the reeds continued to thrive and purify, season after season.

“It’s like tending to a garden that gives back,” Stefaan explains.

Minimal maintenance is required: trimming the reeds in winter, occasionally checking pipes, and letting nature do the rest. The system demonstrates resilience and adaptability, two qualities that human-designed infrastructure often struggles to match.



Els De Roeck, Provincie West-Vlaanderen, Stefaan Deraeve & Bastiaan Notebaert, VITO

Nature’s Intelligence at Work

The reed bed is more than a water filtration system, it is a lesson in how natural processes work together. Water, soil, and plants interact seamlessly, creating a self-regulating ecosystem. Stefaan learned that small, thoughtful actions could have a big impact. Sustainability does not need to be complicated or expensive; it simply requires respect for nature’s wisdom.



Lessons from the Garden

Stefaan's experience offers several insights:

Start Small, Think Big

Even modest systems can make a difference and inspire new ways of thinking. You don't need complicated machinery or expensive tools to work with nature.

Observe and Learn

Nature is self-regulating; Patience and attention reveal how systems adapt and thrive.

Work with Nature

Respect natural processes instead of trying to control them. Reeds, soil, and water already know how to work together.

Replicable Solutions

Simple, visible examples help others understand and see the possibilities for themselves.



Looking Forward

The reed bed behind Stefaan's home is more than a practical system; it is a symbol of what is possible. It shows that curiosity, patience, and small, thoughtful actions can create long-term results.

In Damme, the reeds sway gently in the wind, filtering water, supporting plants, and teaching a powerful lesson about life in harmony with the natural world. Twenty years ago, Stefaan asked a simple question: could it be done? Today, the answer is clear: remarkable things happen when we work with nature, and we can all learn from its wisdom.





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