

Natural Resources Management Activities

DeKalb County Forest Preserve District

October 2015

Primary activities for the month of October included:

1. Seed collection. October is always our most productive month for seed collection. While seed collection starts in June, October is when the most seed is ripe and available for collection, and it is when we ramp up our collection activities. Our stewards help on Wednesdays, and each weekend, sometimes on both Saturday and Sunday, groups from NIU, Kishwaukee College, Scout troops and citizens-at-large are scheduled to help us collect and process seed. We usually have well over 100 pounds and between 75 and 100 species by the time we have finished. Last year, the seed that we collected would have cost us \$22,000 if we had purchased it from our usual seed suppliers.

What do we do with this seed? This month or next, we will plant the 30 acre flood plain prairie at the Sycamore Prairie (formerly the Evergreen Village Mobile Home Park) using some of it. Some will be used to fill in thin spots in existing prairie and wetland restorations. Some will be planted where we used herbicides to remove invasive weeds in our preserves. And, depending on the species required, some will be saved to use in the new Wetland Mitigation Bank that will be constructed in the Afton South Prairie next year. We will still have to buy seed for our larger projects, but collecting our own seed reduces the cost and provides enjoyable educational and recreational opportunities for many citizens to participate in the development and management of their preserves.

2. Seed processing. After our seed is gathered by stripping, plucking, snipping or shaking from the plant, most is dried for a time in order to prevent molding prior to the time it is planted. We do this in paper sacks, in tubs or on special drying racks. The seed is then separated from the stems, capsules or other "chaff" that is attached to it, and is usually sifted through screens to attain something close to pure live seed. It is then carefully stored in a cool dry place until it is mixed with other species for a particular plant community. Planting of most native perennial species is best done in the late fall or winter – just like Mother Nature does it.

3. Planting. Autumn is a good time to plant trees, too. Over 150 trees and shrubs were planted during October; the majority were at the Prairie Oaks Preserve in a savanna restoration. Bur Oaks, White Oaks, Scarlet Oaks, Bitternuts, Hazelnuts and Wild Plums were planted by three dozen friends in memory of Jeff Arnold, a conservation-minded resident of DeKalb County. The "Jeff's Trees" group has come to the preserves every autumn for the past seven years to plant trees in honor of Jeff.

We also planted trees and shrubs at the Afton Wetland Bank with the Outdoor Recreation staff from NIU. This group joins us every October and every April to help plant trees and collect seed. At Afton, we planted Sycamore, Swamp White Oaks, Bur Oaks and Pin Oak trees.

4. Invasive brush removal. As seed collection season winds down, we enter invasion brush removal season. Our restoration ecologist and preserve manager at Afton, Josh Clark, and his staff have been very actively removing invasive brush from the park-like plantings at Afton. Many shrub and tree plantings in the mowed areas there had become infested with Honeysuckle, Mulberry, Box Elder and

other woody invasive plants. This important work will continue at Afton and other preserves in both formal and naturalized plantings throughout the fall and winter as conditions allow.

Tours and educational programs. The pleasant weather in October made for very successful site visits for the two Conservation Biology classes from NIU that come to the forest preserves each fall semester. Professor Holly Jones' students are provided an overview of the assessment, planning and development, management and evaluation strategies that we employ in order to establish the high quality native plant communities and wildlife habitats for which DeKalb County Forest Preserves are known.

We hosted a group of senior citizens for a tour of the South Branch Prairie and the Miller-Elwood Cabin this month. And, as always, each of our seed collection activities includes an overview of our mission and goals along with a discussion of the special features of the site.



Professor Ken Gasser, from the Biological Sciences Dept. at NIU, leads his students on a seed collection foray at one of the Afton prairies.



Professor Gasser's students collected 2 ½ lbs. of Milkweed seeds and ½ lb. of Prairie Cinquefoil.



Friends of Jeff Arnold share a cup of fresh apple cider after planting trees at Prairie Oaks preserve.