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Garden Curator's Letter

By Susan Wilkins

It's that wonderful time of year again when after a deep pause from the pulsating growing season and just enough time to reflect, retool and prepare, the Wildflower Garden opens to welcome in another spring of beauty and renewal.

This is the Wildflower Garden's 110th season of being a wild botanic garden for all to enjoy. When Eloise Butler envisioned a public, native plant sanctuary so many years ago, she set out to create a space that would provide room for a wide variety of plants from all across the state and region and a place that would afford anyone with the interest and inclination an opportunity to learn about and enjoy the experience of native plants in a natural setting. Years later, her hope of what a wild botanic garden could provide for the community endures. It's heartwarming to recognize that we are still working to sustain Eloise's vision.

This season we are pleased to have two horticulture interns and one full-time seasonal gardener working out in the field. These critical staff members work day in and day out to physically care for the Wildflower Garden's plant collections through a variety of tasks that involve enormous amounts of weeding, invasive species removal and planting, not to mention trail maintenance. The 15-acre Wildflower Garden, although naturalistic in its style, is a garden like any other and requires thoughtful and thorough tending throughout the season.

We are excited this season to have the helpful guidance of local and national gardening and natural resources management authorities, including Claudia West, Rick Darke, Roy Diblik, Fred Rozumalski, Lee Frelich, Julia Bohnen and Dan Shaw as we work to improve the health and vitality of the Wildflower Garden. Through meetings, professional conference presentations and literature, these individuals have shared their knowledge and tips about how to work with some of the challenging issues that a garden like ours faces. To this end, look for the addition of several sedge species that will be planted as groundcovers in woodland garden areas this spring. Also, see if you can find a few of the creative ways that we are experimenting with erosion control and soil development in woodland and wetland garden areas this summer.

The Wildflower Garden is an urban ecosystem like no other, and that includes the dedicated people who care for and about it. Volunteers are always welcome to join the volunteer program managed by the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden to assist in the Visitor Shelter and out in the field. In addition, people can help out with special projects, like the completion of the boardwalk through the wetland, by donating to the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden. Keep up to date with current programs and plants in bloom by visiting www.minneapolisparks.org/ebwg. We look forward to seeing you out in the Wildflower Garden this season. Enjoy the beauty of nature today and every day!



Photo: John Toren



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Spring at the Wildflower Garden was a wonderful whirlwind of beautiful plants in bloom, engaging programming and enthusiastic people visiting! Not to mention the enormous amount of work involved with planting projects and constant garden care. We owe a special thanks to the many new Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board seasonal staff members working in the Garden, as well as the education program, for a successful and engaging season so far.

Please welcome Garden Education staff members:

Kari Ramstrom, Garden Education Program Coordinator

Timothy Glenn, Interpretive Naturalist (in a new role as lead daytime naturalist)

Amie Durenberger, Interpretive Naturalist

Maia Campbell, Interpretive Naturalist

And Garden Field staff members:

Chee Yang, Natural Resources Specialist

Emily Christian, Horticulture Support Intern

Kathleen Mitchell, Horticulture Support Intern

Also, thank you to returning interpretive naturalist staff for another great season: Lauren Borer, Jodi Gustafson, Tammy Mercer, Wes Nugteren, Kyla Sisson, Kara Snow, and Ron Spinosa. We are fortunate to have such a wonderful group of people working at the Wildflower Garden.

With so much going on, I'd like to mention one program in particular that we are getting ready for this July. This program has been an important one for us since 2010. Let me tell you why: Working with summer school youth from Minneapolis Public Schools has always been a highlight for Garden staff. For the past seven years (this will be our eighth summer), about 500 fourth-graders visit the Garden and Quaking Bog to spend a day exploring the ecology with naturalists and learning about things like the amazing adaptive skills of birds.

One or two classrooms visit each day over a period of a few weeks, allowing for smaller groups and a richer experience. For some of the students, more than you would imagine, this meaningful day is the first time they have experienced what it's like to be in a natural setting as wild as Wirth Park, let alone being guided by a caring and skilled teacher. For many, the program opens their

eyes to a world beyond the confines of classrooms and malls, offering a break from electronic devices and giving them a chance to get closer to nature right in their own city. Our staff members are excited about this kind of programming because they are able to reach a new generation of potential stewards and nature lovers and share with them the joy and happiness of being connected to nature. It can take time in the elements, as well as skilled mentors, to help foster a love of nature, and this programming is one wonderful step along the path to making that connection, which can last a lifetime.

Unfortunately, there are often barriers to helping get urban youth engaged in nature-based programs. Minneapolis Public Schools' budget cuts in recent years have decreased students' ability to take trips. But the Friends of the Wild Flower Garden's student transportation grant program, which pays for a significant portion of Minneapolis Public Schools costs to bus kids to the Garden, is making those nature experiences possible. We are deeply grateful for your continued support of this program, and I want to say thank you to each and every member who contributes to keep it going. Your contributions really do make a difference in the lives of youth visiting the Garden.

I hope you'll stop by this month to see our programming in action, and enjoy your strolls along the Garden trails all season long!



Photo: John Toren

Horticultural intern Kathleen Mitchell removing invasive grape vines from the upland garden.



Garden Curator's Notes

By Susan Wilkins



Now that the role of President of Friends of the Wild Flower Garden has officially changed hands, I'd like to send a whole-hearted thank you to Pam Weiner and a warm welcome to Kathy Connelly. Pam's wise leadership, compassionate and steady stance, skillful navigation of complex issues and capacity to take the long view have benefited the Garden greatly over the past ten years. It's been a true pleasure to work with her, and I anticipate an equally fruitful collaboration with Kathy. I appreciate Kathy's depth of knowledge of the natural world, her readiness to address new challenges and embrace change, and her intelligent approach to leadership.

In a fresh direction for my Letters in The Fringed Gentian, I want to reveal more about the inner workings of the Garden, how I think about this special place and what drives the work and decisions here. To start, I'd like to share with you a broader understanding I have come to on changes I've observed in the Garden.

How do we feel about nature?

I wrestle with the tension between an ideal of the natural world and a practical knowledge of how these 15 acres function. An insight I have gained over the years is that we are a self-referential species: we believe our particular view of the world is a good summation of how nature is supposed to be. This approach often plays out as a desire to keep things the same or perhaps return to a simpler, more unspoiled time. It gives us a certain sense of security and stability, even moral resolve. The problem is that this is a static view of nature.

Nature to its very core is the epitome of change.

I have observed here at the Garden that nature is anything but static. There are the changes that we expect and accept, like winter into spring and an oak seedling growing into a tree. There are the changes that we don't consent to, like the presence of buckthorn and invasive earthworms in our forests and the very natural shift, over time,

of the composition of plants in a woodland, meadow or bog. To find a starting point for clearer observation and decision-making, one has to let go, if only for a moment, the perception of change as a good or bad force and simply see change as the force that it is, subtly and vividly at work in the natural world.

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Change is reshaping the places we love.

I admit I generally don't like change when it comes to the places I love. Here at the Garden, for instance, I like the forests to look and behave in ways that are familiar and to my liking: a healthy layer of leaf litter all season long; soft supple soil under the duff; an abundance of wildflowers, ferns, sedges, grasses, shrubs and trees; everything regenerating on its own with no invasive plants. But that's not what I see. The forests aren't behaving! The soils show bare by mid-summer, sometimes compacted and dry, many forest species

are not regenerating and invasive plants are continually popping up.

Why? Relatively new factors like invasive plants and earthworms are infiltrating the forest, making conditions more inhospitable to native plants. Nature will continue to change in the "natural" ways we expect – e.g. forest succession and seasonal transformation – but in addition we are experiencing a host of other changes which bring new conditions to grapple with and will in turn influence the "natural" changes.

So what are we doing?

Our best position for realizing the goals we've created for this revered space is to be thoughtful and educated stewards of change – all change. We work to understand the significance and the impacts of known changes that are occurring. We continue to manage the actions we have already put in place to counter adverse changes, such as our highly effective efforts to control invasive buckthorn and garlic mustard. We anticipate and prepare for more changes, thoughtfully implementing adaptive management practices that are forward thinking.

Through it all, we endeavor to be creative and dexterous in bringing about the best possible outcomes for the ongoing spirit and vitality of the Garden. This all matters so much because we need these natural places and wild garden spaces to be healthy, dynamic, diverse and beautiful. They nourish us in a way that nothing else can. ❁



Natural Resources Specialist Chee Yang heads into the Garden to remove narrow leaf cattail, an invasive species in the wetland.

photo: Betsy McNemey