

# Liz Anderson: A Calling To Be Outside

By Donna Ahrens

When Liz Anderson retired in 2009, after 27 years with the Hennepin County Library System, she had no ready answer to the inevitable question from friends: “What are you going to do now?”

Liz recalls that though she hadn’t quite found the answer, “I was determined to let the game come to me.” It has—and the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden has been a major beneficiary of her decision. Over the past few years, she has stepped up her volunteer work with the Garden, joining the Legacy Volunteer Program and taking on a leadership role with the Friends Invasives Plant Action Group.

Liz had been a frequent visitor to the Garden since the early 1990s, when she bought a house in neighboring Bryn Mawr. Over time, the Garden became a peaceful retreat from a demanding work pace, and a place for meditation and reflection.

Soon after she retired, Liz enrolled in the Master Naturalist program offered by the UofM Extension Service in conjunction with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. The program opened the door to a deep love of and fascination with the natural world. “I realized how much of my life had been spent with a roof overhead, and that where I seemed to want to be, in retirement, was outside,” she recalls.

When she heard about the Legacy Volunteer Program that the Garden was launching, she jumped at the chance to participate. Each legacy volunteer is responsible for a small, designated section of the Garden and commits to removing all of the invasive species in that section for the season. Garden Curator Susan Wilkins trains the volunteers and oversees the project. Liz says a high point has been the relationships she’s developed with Susan and the Garden naturalists:

“They’re incredibly knowledgeable and always happy to share what they know.”

She describes the legacy plot work as “very much seasonal. The two major things we’re looking for are garlic mustard and buckthorn. With garlic mustard, there’s about a two-month window, May and June—the exact time of year that you want to be outside.” She takes a



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break during the hottest part of the summer and then zeroes in on buckthorn in the fall, coordinating work on her plot with the invasive group’s buckthorn removal sessions.

“As a legacy steward, you’re trying to just create enough of a healthy environment so that the plants can do their own thing,” she says. “The special thing about it is that you are making it possible for them to recover and thrive.”

Just two seasons into the legacy program, Liz has seen the rewards of her work. “In 2010, I was there probably five or six hours a week—really flat-out working—for the six or eight weeks of garlic mustard season. What was amazing was that the second year, [the garlic mustard removal work] was no more than half that. And that’s a sign of success.”

Last September, she joined a group of volunteers who spent the day planting more than 200 native trees and shrubs in the buffer zone and legacy plots. Colorful flags designated the various plants. Liz describes the experience as “inspirational, really, seeing my plot fill up where there hadn’t been much there before. It had been choked with buckthorn and garlic mustard, and now there are all these beautiful pink and green and yellow flags, where these new plants will grow. It brought me to tears.”

In addition to caring for her plot, Liz has volunteered for years with the invasive plant group at the Garden. In 2010, she became a co-chair, joining Friends board members Jim Proctor, who had long coordinated the Invasives program, and Ellen Lipshultz. “We hear so much about how you can’t be successful in keeping buckthorn out,” she says. “But we’ve seen here, you can be successful—because it’s a small enough area and because of the incredible determination” of her co-chairs. “It’s been a wonderful thing to do,” she adds.

Reflecting on her volunteer experiences with the Wildflower Garden, Liz comments, “I think some people have a calling to be outside, by yourself, and that’s how it was for me. Sometimes I’m working in my plot, and I look up and think, ‘Oh my gosh, I get to do this!’ I wonder, how am I going to give back to this place—because it just keeps on giving to me.”

By letting the post-retirement “game” come to her, Liz has discovered meaningful ways to give back to the Garden—and to witness the success of her dedicated efforts.

— Donna Ahrens is a member of the Friends board of directors.