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## How I Created My Woodland

*Or, What I Did to Save My Rescued Plants!*

By Donna VanBuecken, Wild Ones Executive Director



The rescued woodland species have comfortably taken root in the dappled shade around an Aldo Leopold bench.

When a group of us started our Fox Valley Area (WI) Chapter ten years ago, I took on the responsibility of being Outagamie County Plant Rescue (Dig) Chair. Because John and I both worked in construction at the time, we had a front row seat to the wanton destruction of beautiful native plants. This caused us both a great deal of alarm. Prior to the formation of our chapter, I had done some rescues on my own (always with the owner's permission). But I was just one person, so my salvage was minimal. And, at the time, I had only a small shaded area into which I could bed the woodland plants.

With the charter of our chapter and the educational process the leaders undertook to provide for our members, I became aware of the alternatives to allowing the destruction of native plants such as rue anemone (*Anemonella thalictroides*), ginger (*Asarum*

*canadense*), Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*), Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema atrorubens*), sarsaparilla (*Aralia hispida*), shooting star (*Dodecatheon meadia*), squirrel corn (*Dicentra canadensis*), spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*), large-flowered trillium (*Trillium grandiflorum*), trout lily (*Erythronium americanum*), a variety of ferns and sedges, and wild geranium (*Geranium maculatum*) – my personal favorite. I set about preparing a place into which I could transplant my rescued woodland plants.

We are fortunate to be living on a double lot totaling 1.3 acres, with many mature trees – bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*), shagbark hickory, (*Carya ovata*), white ash (*Fraxinum americana*), sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), and some huge white spruce (*Picea spp.*). One of our goals when we acquired this home was to create our own private

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 reserve, so we had already begun to add more trees. Having inventoried the plant species in my yard with the help of Don Vorpahl (a Wisconsin natural landscape designer and frequent speaker at our Wisconsin native landscaping conferences), I realized that with a little effort I could develop a nice restored woodland by adding rescued trees and shrubs and leaf mulch to an already existing clump of mature trees.

My husband and I began by spreading wood chips from the municipal tree dump. We covered the entire area with 5 to 6 inches of wood chips, and continued to keep the site covered with fresh wood chips all summer long. Then in the fall, we dumped all the chopped leaves from our other trees on top of the wood chips. By the next spring's first plant rescue, we were already seeing a substantial change in the heavy clay soil beneath our restored woodland area.

Having been taught how to properly rescue native plants by the Green Bay (WI) Chapter's plant rescue people, I set about restoring my little woodland. The trick, of course, is to take as much soil with the plant as you can carry, to enable the transplanting from one site to another to be as non-traumatic as possible for the salvaged plant. This soil brings with it the microorganisms and mycorrhizae that typically inhabit healthy woodland soil. Ultimately, however, this wonderfully rich soil served not only to simplify the transition process for the plant, but also to further enhance the process we had started with the mulching and, not to forget, the surprise volunteer plants and seed that came along with this transplanted soil.

After only a couple of plant rescue seasons, it was quite apparent that my woodland would not be big enough. So, we have continued to increase the size of the woodland on a continuous basis by adding more wood chips and more chopped leaves from our yard. I can foresee the day when the entire east side of our yard will be covered with woodland. It has been a wonderfully rewarding experience.

**Side notes by Donna VanBuecken  
and Diane Hilscher, St. Croix Oak Savanna (MN) Chapter:**

- One benefit we weren't aware we would be receiving when we began this project was the increase in bird species in our yard. Our prairie restoration, of course, attracts many species, but we are being entertained by increasing numbers of woodland species including but not limited to, black-capped chickadee, brown thrasher, downy woodpecker, pine grosbeak, rufous-sided towhee, white-breasted nuthatch, wood thrush and yellow-bellied sapsucker.
- In place of using wood chips, leaves can be used for the initial preparation phase until the ground layer is established. Although chopped leaves are preferable *after* the ground layer plants have been introduced, unchopped leaves can be used for the initial preparation phase as well. They often blow off until the ground layer is established – you might find trimmed branches from evergreens to be useful, piled on top of loose leaves. Unchopped leaves do not

decompose as readily and tend to smother the small plants if applied in too thick a layer. Note that sugar maple (*A. saccharum*), and to a lesser extent basswood (*Tilia americana*), have especially nutrient-rich leaves and are excellent in forming a humus layer. While most trees pull the nutrients back into their twigs prior to leaf-drop, these two tree species in particular retain nutrients out in their leaves which then fall onto the surface of the soil.

- If you do not have woodland species available to you from plant rescues, you may be able to find some of these species through local reputable shade gardening nurseries. Further, there are several species of prairie plants that can function as transitional plants and work well in both shade and sun. Specifically, large-leafed aster (*Aster macrophyllus*), columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), zig-zag goldenrod (*Solidago flexicaulis*), bluestem goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*), Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium van-bruntiae*), wild geranium (*G. maculatum*), thimbleweed (*Anemone cylindrica*), alum root (*Heuchera americana*), Solomon's seal (*P. biflorum*), and even blue lobelia (*Lobelia siphilitica*) – as well as a variety of sedges especially Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pennsylvanica*).
- Maintaining the site requires some ongoing effort. You should continue to add chopped leaves to areas which don't get enough leaf drop from the trees, as well as to the perimeter to maintain a clean edge and to provide the nutrients needed by the plants growing on the outer edge.
- Volunteer trees and shrubs delivered in bird droppings include buckthorn (*Rhamnus spp*), Norway maple (*Acer planatoides*), honeysuckle (*Lonicera spp*), etc. These are easily pulled in the spring when the soil is first starting to warm and is still moist. Suckering trees and shrubs such as the wild cherries (*Prunus virginiana*), gooseberry (*Ribes cynosbati*), currant (*Ribes americanum*), and dogwoods (*Cornus spp*), require a little more care. If the rabbits and deer don't take care of them, it may be necessary to do some pruning to keep them from becoming too dominant.
- Other maintenance involves pulling some of the more aggressive species to keep them from overrunning other plants. In the woodland, stary Solomon's seal (*Smilacina stellata*), or tall meadow rue (*Thalictrum polygamum*), are good examples. Also, keep an eye on vining plants such as wild grape (*Vitis spp*). If let go, they can shade out even mature trees. And finally, watch for native, but potentially problematic plant species such as poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*). If you want to leave the poison ivy for the birds, please at least mark the plant so visitors don't become affected by its toxicity. Note that only poison ivy vines that are mature enough to climb trees have flowers and berries. Once you have one of these growing on a tree you may want to consider removing just the lower leaves to a height of seven to eight feet. Someone would almost have to chew on the woody bark of the poison ivy vine before they could come in contact with the toxin. 🍄