

a voice
for the natural
landscaping
movement



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To the Rescue

Saving native plants from destruction. Tips for a successful plant dig.

By Mariette Nowak

My husband was the first in my family to rescue and replant native plants. He had begun a new job in a developing industrial park where native woodlands and meadows were being converted into office buildings. (Industrial *park* – what a misnomer!) Walking the grounds on his lunch hour, he witnessed the continual loss of beautiful native vegetation, and soon began bringing wildflowers home, where we planted them in place of our lawn.

Our own Wild Ones Executive Director, Donna VanBuecken, and her husband, John, started landscaping with natives in much the same way. They worked in construction, and became alarmed at the wanton destruction of native plants. They too began to rescue them and bring them home.

Plant rescues are a rewarding way to limit the loss of our native flora, and beautify our gardens and/or natural areas at the same time. Early spring is one of the best times to organize plant rescues. In most of the country, plants are dormant, the soil is usually damp, rain is frequent, and there's a long growing season ahead – all of which help to insure the success of transplants.

As the director of Wehr Nature Center in Milwaukee County, I organized a weekly "Bulldozer Alert" for many years, at which volunteers and I would harvest plants from development sites and replant them at the center. I'd like to share with you dozen tips for organizing a successful plant dig, based on the experience I gleaned over the years.

Finding Sites Network with real-estate agents, contractors, and developers, and ask them to notify your chapter about likely sites.

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Permission Always, always obtain permission from the owners of the property. Nothing can damage your personal reputation and that of Wild Ones, as much as trespassing on another's property.

Waivers All participants should also be asked to sign a waiver of liability for the owner and for Wild Ones. You can find a sample of the waiver in the *Chapter Guidebook*.

Telephone Trees A site may become available at a moment's notice, so organize a phone tree. Phone trees can be arranged in branches according to telephone exchange or geographic area. Each branch head can call three to four others, who in turn will call another three or four. Small sites may be able to accommodate only a few people – one branch.

Prepare Planting Site Plan your planting site in advance – one that will match the dig site as much as possible. Consider soil type, moisture, sun, exposure, etc. If possible, prepare the planting site ahead of time by removing other vegetation, weeding, etc., so that transplanting can be done as quickly as possible. All these things will, of course, help insure the survival of the plants.

Clothing Wear long sleeves, pants, gardening gloves, and sturdy shoes. I know people who have gotten poison ivy from the roots of invisible plants, and could likely have prevented this with protective clothing.

Equipment Sharp spades are essential. Plant containers can be cardboard boxes lined with plastic, plastic ice cream pails, or regular 3-gallon pails. Although plastic bags are used by some, I think rigid containers are more protective. Plastic sleds or laundry plastic baskets with rope handles are handy for pulling heavy boxes over rough terrain. Think it through – if part of your route is through shin-deep mud you need to be able to carry, not drag your load.

Digging Dig a circle around the plant, disturbing roots as little as possible, and keep the soil around the roots intact as you lift the plant to your container. This will preserve the fine root hairs and the mycorrhizal fungi associated with the roots which are so important for many plants. If the plant has buds, flowers or fruits, cut them off so the plants can use all their energy for growing new roots, not on forming seeds and flowers. If the plant is in leaf, remove up to 50 percent of the leaves, especially those at the tip, matching the amount of foliage to the root system which remains after digging.

Don't be Greedy This is especially important when there is only a limited number of prized species available. I especially encourage chapters to consider planting at restoration sites or nature centers, where the plants are likely to have a more secure future. At the nature center where I worked, volunteers transplanted most plants to our grounds, but could take home one box for their own yards. This is a reasonable reward for their hard work.

Planting Replant immediately whenever possible at the same depth that the plant was originally growing. Water well. In dry soils or during dry season, water the hole for the plant before putting in the plant, and then again after planting. Mulch the transplant well,

matching the mulch to that in the plant's original habitat when possible.

Post-Dig Care For the first two or three weeks, water twice a week. For the rest of the first growing season, a weekly watering is usually sufficient.

Thank You Don't forget to send a thank you note to the owners of the site.

Also, don't forget to be personally thankful for your good fortune. In the Milwaukee area, dig sites are very rare these days, since few undeveloped sites remain, and the Wehr Nature Center has not sponsored plant digs for many years. Most native landscapers will have to purchase plants, just as others purchase cultivars.

As Wendy Woolcot, land manager at the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Milwaukee says, "It still surprises me when people who should know better assume that landscaping with native plants should be cheap. The cost of a lawn is accepted, like death and taxes, but actually paying for a wild landscape seems wrong because those plants should 'be there anyway.' Well, the days are gone when we could dig up a few plants from Grampa's woods and start our own little nostalgic garden. Why should the endangered wildlings, plants that can't be raised on an assembly line and won't grow in every soil, come back for free?" I couldn't agree more. ♦