

IMA's Approach

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Have you heard the expression, "Use the right tool for the right job?" The same applies to habitat restoration—plants can be "tools." The right plants we use in the Fairfax County Park Authority's Invasive Management Area (IMA) program are native plants. We focus our work on several sites within the Shanes Creek portion of Royal Lake—but Saturday's work was a little different. The park entrance off of Gainsborough Drive, close to the Claridge Court. intersection, was choked with invasive plants and too much yard waste. Invasive plants such as [Amur honeysuckle](#), [multiflora rose](#), [English ivy](#), [garlic mustard](#), and [autumn olive](#) were growing wild in this plot for at least 10 years. [Japanese stiltgrass](#) also plagues the area later in the summer. Invasive plants are even more of a problem because a storm sewer discharges here and its perennial stream may carry silt, not to mention spread seeds, to Shanes Creek and Royal Lake. Invasive plants are the wrong tools for the erosion-prevention job.

On April 12, 2008, IMA volunteers started removing the invasive plants from this entrance area. We also immediately planted natives so that the new plants could curb any erosion that might result from removing the invasive plants. One section of the trailhead was crowded by autumn olives. Although the largest olive bushes remain and will send up new shoots, we will repeatedly cut them back until the bushes die. Those olives cannot be uprooted because either too much soil would be disturbed in the process or, in one case, the roots are intertwined with those of a native tree. We also planted a sycamore in this area; sycamores have extensive surface roots ideal for soil retention. Also, an American persimmon was added, with an intricate, suckering root system. Its fruit is enjoyed by many animals including humans (much tastier than Chinese persimmons).

Another part of this narrow park entrance retains water for several days after a rain and was loaded with honeysuckle bushes. This muddy plot is perfect for moisture-thriving plants, such as the buttonbushes, silky dogwoods, and winterberry. More honeysuckle were pulled higher along the slope where the ground is drier, and volunteers planted spicebush, highbush blueberry, and maple-leaf viburnum. Herbaceous plants, such as woodland sunflower, golden ragwort, sensitive fern, Christmas fern, and grey-headed coneflower, polished the work with native groundcover. Once these plants mature, this little area will be a haven for wildlife, especially birds and butterflies. As for humans, this strip will transform from a previous tangle of festering weeds into a model woodland area. What a great example of how people can both use plants to better serve a critical property function (erosion control) while promoting wildlife! In the end, everybody wins!

Replanting with multiple native species has a number of advantages. Besides broadening the food source, the different plants have specialized root systems: some are surface roots, others penetrate deeper into the soil, the root densities may vary, some plants run rooting networks or rhizomes to new plants, and so forth. By strategically planting mixed species targeting wet or dry areas, the complementing root complexes better control erosion than a monoculture. This re-established native plant community will develop into a more resilient habitat should disease, severe weather conditions, or over browsing decimate any single species.

The volunteers also worked to clean up yard refuse, wooden fencing and synthetic trash that had accumulated on parkland. Over the years, people became used to piling yard debris "in the woods." This habit, instead of helping our forests, is slowly killing them. Too many leaves and branches will prevent our native ground covers from germinating and growing. The yard waste in this area was piled so high that it was sliding into and contaminating the stream. If you notice anyone illegally dumping yard waste on parkland (or any other land), you should contact the police at their non-emergency number (703-691-2131). Some neighbors sharing these concerns have already documented unlawful dumping, and thank you for doing so. If you have trash or yard debris to be disposed, simply bag it accordingly and set it on your curb on garbage day—we can all be good neighbors. Hopefully, people will notice the effort that volunteers (residents both within and outside of KPW) invested in the forests and know that everyone continues benefiting from caring parkland stewards.

Please visit this site and see habitat restoration in action! Better yet, join us for a workday! If you need further details or would like to participate, please contact me at greg@grsykes.com.