

Bye-Bye, Buckthorn!

Last of the Invasive Species Removed from Section of McDonald Woods

This story begins with its ending: birds, bees, flowers, trees, butterflies, and wildlife, all living and thriving together in one healthy ecosystem, in a beautiful, cleared, woodland area. However, this positive conclusion has only come about after a quarter-century of rigorous and intensive planning and labor. The actual beginning looked much different.

Senior ecologist Jim Steffen has been with the Chicago Botanic Garden for 25 years and has been managing the 100-acre McDonald Woods for that entire time. When he first launched its restoration, recalled Steffen, “the buckthorn was so dense in places, you had to crawl on your hands and knees across the bare and sterile ground to make any progress.” His goal has been to remove buckthorn and other invasive species in order to restore an environment that allows a healthy ecosystem to flourish.

This winter will mark a milestone, when the last of the buckthorn will be removed from approximately 30 acres of badly degraded oak woodland. However, Steffen is quick to point out that the job of keeping the invasive species under control is never really over. “If left unattended, the land would easily and quickly fill up with new invasive species,” he said. “In order for restoration to be successful, ongoing management is mandatory.”

Originally from Europe, buckthorn was brought to this region in the late 1800s, primarily for use as landscape hedges. The problem is that after the seeds are dispersed by birds, the plant grows so rapidly and densely that it takes over the area and robs native plants of important nutrients and sunlight, degrading the natural habitat. The overpowering nature of buckthorn has been shown to harm native plants and wildlife and to change physical and chemical properties of the soil where it grows.

The removal of the mature buckthorn is extremely demand-

ing work. “Wintertime is the best time to do it, because you’re not trampling native vegetation and damaging the soil,” said Steffen. He and his team must spend months, often in subfreezing weather, cutting down the buckthorn and other invasive shrubs, treating the stumps with herbicide, then forming them into piles and eventually burning them.

None of this could be done without the commitment of a very dedicated, hard-working and passionate team of volunteers, one of whom is Cindy Grau. She agrees with Steffen that the restoration work is very physical, but notes that it is emotionally gratifying. “It is a nice thing when you can look and see what you have done,” Grau said. “It is a major change. What has been cleared is beautiful. You couldn’t walk in it before because it was filled with buckthorn, but now things grow, and there are birds and animals. You can see flowers and plants in the understory.”

The restoration work in McDonald Woods by Steffen and his team made construction of the new North Branch Trail addition much easier. People riding bikes or walking on the multiuse path through McDonald Woods are able to enjoy a more interesting and attractive woody landscape; they can also pause to read interpretive signs describing the moraine, wetland, and woodland regions that are part of the Garden’s landscape.

It is a fitting way to appreciate all of the hard work that preceded it. For more on the Garden’s buckthorn eradication effort, visit chicagobotanic.org/buckthorn.