

USDA Forest Service Botany in the News

Washburn Ranger District Efforts Support Eco-municipality Goals

In search of a source for local, native plant seed to re-vegetate disturbed areas, the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest embarked on a plan to collect and grow their own seed. Native seed “plots” were started at several of the District Ranger offices... including the Washburn office. "Although we would very much like to use locally-adapted, native seeds in our restoration and re-seeding projects, we have been unable to find it from commercial sources," said Linda Parker, Forest Ecologist on the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. The Forest Service, in cooperation with Pam Troxell and interns from the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute/Northland College collected and planted native plant seed last fall in a plot at the Washburn Forest Service office. In the coming years, the seed will be harvested and stored for use on projects that require vegetative restoration. According to Matt Bushman, a botanist with the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest, “growing native plants for use as a seed source allows us to know exactly what plants we are using on the national forest. This is important because past seed mixes that were used had a number of seeds that were not native to the area and thus not the best fit for the land.”

Why native plants? Native plants are adapted to the local climate and soil conditions, thus are more hardy and drought tolerant. In the National Forest, native plants are used for a variety of purposes, such as stabilizing stream banks, reducing soil erosion and sedimentation, reducing the spread of non-native invasive plants, improving wildlife and fisheries habitat, and mitigating the effects of wildfire and other types of disturbances. In a business or home application, native plants provide a low maintenance landscape option. Once established, they save time and money by eliminating, or significantly reducing, the need for fertilizers, pesticides, water, and lawn maintenance. Plus, native plants benefit the environment by providing an important source of nectar, pollen, and seeds that serve as food for native butterflies, insects, birds and other animals.

This spring, two additional native plant projects were undertaken by the Washburn Ranger District office. The first project removed the non-native shrubs near the office entrance, including invasive species popular in landscaping years ago (honeysuckle and Japanese barberry), and replaced them with native plants. The second project was to install a rain garden to deal with “Lake Washburn”, the name coined by District staff for an area near the parking lot where a “lake” appears for several days after a substantial rain or spring thaw.



Picture 1: The newly landscaped front entrance of the Washburn district office of the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest shows the beauty and versatility of native plants in landscaping.

Several local businesses were contracted for these two projects. John Mydels, of Friends of the Earth Garden Center, provided materials and site preparation as well as valuable consultation on the rain garden. Pat Juett, of From the Earth Landscaping, came up with an aesthetically pleasing design for both the entrance area and the rain garden plus assisted with the planting. And, Becky Brown, owner of Wildflower Woods, a nursery in Washburn specializing in native plants, grew approximately 700 plants from locally collected seed for the two gardens, as well as assisted with the planting. Becky also instructed the 4th grade students from Washburn Elementary School regarding the function of rain gardens. The students spent the school year studying watersheds and received hands-on experience helping plant the rain garden.

According to Jennifer Maziasz, Land Management Planner with the Forest Service, “Both of the gardens will serve as demonstration sites for the City and area residents. The garden at the entrance of the office will show how attractive and easy it is to replace a lawn and landscape with native plants. Information on all of the plants will be available so the public can easily stop in, see a plant they like and find out what it is and how to grow it. The rain garden is the first rain garden demonstration site in Washburn and has already shown its value. “Lake Washburn” is gone and replaced with a sea of plants.”



Picture 2: Fourth graders from Washburn Elementary School assist in the planting of the rain garden at the Washburn district office.

The primary purpose of a rain garden is to soak up rain water that runs off of roofs, driveways and lawns, reducing the amount of run-off that ends up in our streams and lakes. That run-off can contain pollutants such as lawn chemicals, road salt, and silt that are gathered by the rainwater and sent into storm sewers and drains, eventually dumping out into Lake Superior. Rain gardens allow water to slowly filter into the ground rather than running off into storm drains. According to a UW Extension Rain Garden brochure, when compared to a patch of conventional lawn, a rain garden allows about 30 percent more water to soak into the ground.

In 2005, the City of Washburn became one of the first eco-municipalities in the United States. Staff involved in the project feel these efforts are in line with the goals of an eco-municipality. Granted, the projects are small steps, but in terms of sustainability, the use of fossil fuel for lawn mowing was reduced as well as the pollution associated with mowing. The rain garden helps recharge groundwater by increasing the amount of water filtering into the ground, thereby reducing the amount of water flowing into the City’s storm water system. Just imagine, collectively, the neighborhood and environmental benefits if all those 4th graders convince their parents to landscape with native plants or create a rain garden.



Picture 3: Washburn elementary school 4th graders, U.S. Forest Service personnel, and area business partners pose behind the newly planted native rain garden at the Washburn district office.

Written for the Ashland Daily Press by Jennifer Maziasz, Wendy Stein and Matt Bushman 07-02-2007