FRIENDS OF
NACHUSA
GRASSLANDS

August 2025

Dear Friend,

Nachusa Grasslands is generally described as a prairie restoration. And it is that. But there are other habitats that equally share under the banner of Nachusa Grasslands: wetlands, savannas, and woodlands.

The subject of this issue of *A Prairie Calling* is woodland restoration. Many of the same restoration methods are utilized in this habitat as are used in prairie restoration. This ecosystem, however, is very different. While there is some overlap of species, the woods contain unique plants you will never see on the prairie.

Two volunteers have been devoting their energy and expertise to woodland restoration for a long time: Mike Carr and Paul Say. Their enthusiasm for this project is truly astounding and, I think, evident in this issue.

With warm regards from Nachusa Grasslands,

Charles

Charles Larry

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A Prairie Calling
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FRIENDS OF NACHUSA GRASSLANDS

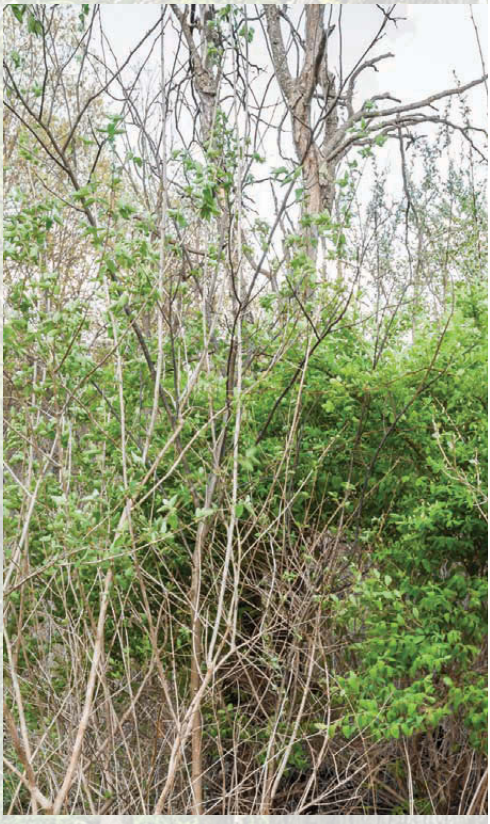
Woodland Restoration at Nachusa

by Mike Carr and Paul Say

Woodland restoration is in its infancy at Nachusa, so we must start the way our prairie restoration pioneers did. First clear the land of invasive trees and shrubs (woodies), then find the seeds we need to plant to build a strong ecosystem.

Methods of Woodland Restoration

1 We use three methods to remove invasive woodies. The first and most widespread method of dealing with an area of honeysuckle, for example, is to cut it all down using hand loppers, rotary brush cutter, or electric chainsaw. This leaves the root system viable, permitting resprouts unless herbicide is applied to the cut ends. It's convenient to use loppers and a quart squirt bottle of herbicide. This method is the most selective, causes the least disturbance in areas containing desirable plants, and allows instant access for other stewardship such as overseeding.



Invasives autumn olive and honeysuckle. Photo: Charles Larry

Paul Say chainsawing honeysuckle. Photo: Tim Tam Ngo

Spraying herbicide on cut honeysuckle. Photos: Charles Larry

2 The second method uses basil bark herbicides. By applying herbicide to every stem, close to the ground, the plant is killed in one to three months. This results in fewer resprouts but is a long-term process, leaving the area looking messy until the dead growth is removed by mowing down with heavy equipment or until fire and natural decay clears the land.

Mike Carr spraying basil bark herbicide on honeysuckle. Photo: Dee Hudson

3 Large organizations such as Nachusa commonly use the third method, a forestry mulcher such as a Fecon, to mow down and grind up all standing undergrowth. This can cover large areas in little time. The downside is that none of the plants have been killed. Resprouts must be treated in the spring, typically requiring two or three sweeps in May and June.

Bur oak acorn.
Drawing: Betty Higby

The Fecon mulcher in action.
Photo: Dee Hudson

After invasive woodies are gone, there are typically a handful of hardy survivors such as nettles, briars, and knotweed plants. Increasing the diversity of plants is done through overseeding. Some plants will successfully spread without intervention, wild geranium and joe pye weed for example, while others require collecting seed from another site and spreading it where desired.

Joe Pye Weed (*Eutrochum purpureum*) Photo: Charles Larry

After removing invasive plants, how do you keep them out? The long-term solution takes advantage of a vulnerability of woody invasives: fire. Oak/hickory woodlands developed around repeated low-intensity fires. Thick bark and deep roots allow healthy, mature oak trees to tolerate fire as it burns through surrounding leaf litter. A honeysuckle or autumn olive seedling with shallow roots and papery bark will be scorched and killed. Prescribed fires in early April or November can control honeysuckle regrowth over hundreds of acres at a time. Burning brush piles in winter can clear deadfall and cut plant material.

All these methods achieve the goal of allowing more light to restore the natural understory.

There are two categories of seed to collect: a base layer of more common species and highlights of more unique plants. The more common are easier to find and collect in quantity and will grow in degraded areas. They can provide an initial vegetative cover and forage for wildlife, fuel for fire, and roots to prevent erosion. It is important to note the habitat of seeds where they are collected so they can be matched to similar areas in the restoration.

Wild Geraniums (*Geranium maculatum*)
Photo: Charles Larry

Photo:Charles Larry

Unique Woodland Plants

Once we have a base of common plants, we add unique plants. The search for rarer plants is a favorite part of restoration. It requires long hours of sauntering in woodlands within 50 miles: parks, preserves, and private properties, with permission, of course. Even in protected areas, permission can often be attained. If not, if an unusual plant is found in a prohibited area, it's likely to be found nearby as well. More than two dozen rare woodland plants have been found in our region, most in more than one location.

Doll's Eyes (*Actaea pachypoda*)
Photo: Paul Say
Jack-in-the-Pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*)
Photo: Dee Hudson
Poke Milkweed (*Asclepias exaltata*)
Photo: Charles Larry

Late Horse Gentian
(*Triosteum perfoliatum*)
Photo:Charles Larry

Wild Yam (*Dioscorea villosa*)

Maidenhair Fern
(*Adiantum pedatum*)

Photos:
Charles
Larry

Sauntering will not lead to success unless you are looking for something that seems out of place or interesting. According to Mike, "I'm often drawn to a color, leaf shape, or an area that seems different from the surrounding area. I go off trail and am often surprised at what I discover." His aids include a phone app for identification and GPS coordinates to mark locations. Revisiting unique plants throughout their lifecycle helps in identifying them in any season.

A complete restoration is an ongoing, long process that requires continued weed and woodie control as well as regular fire. Many of the special woodland plants take years for their seed to germinate. Paul and Mike say, "We'll be seeing you in the woods for a long time!"

Rattlesnake Fern
(*Botrypus virginianus*) Photo:
Charles Larry

Mike Carr

Photos: Dee Hudson

Paul Say

Mike Carr, A lifelong woodland enthusiast and observer. I have spent 15 years working at Nachusa to remove woodies, first at Big Jump, and then anywhere else that needed woodies control. Recently I have begun concentrating on picking and planting unusual woodland plants at Nachusa to increase diversity in our woodlands.

Paul Say started attending Saturday workdays at Nachusa in 2015 and soon began stewarding the 24-acre Didier Woods and participating on the prescribed fire crew.

Shining Bedstraw
(*Galium concinnum*)
Photo: Charles Larry

This newsletter was produced by Friends of Nachusa Grasslands volunteers.

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