

Buffer project at Oswegatchie Hills adds to nature's ambiance

By Suzanne Thompson

Publication: The Day

Published 10/13/2013



Dana Jensen/The Day

Sean Ashburner, a board member of Friends of Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve, along with other volunteers plant silky dogwoods and shadbrush serviceberries along the shore of Clark Pond in the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve in East Lyme on Oct. 5.

Looking to escape the daily rat race and step back into pristine woodlands for a few minutes or hours? Within only a few turns down the road from I-95 traffic, strip malls and suburbia, the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve on the East Lyme bank of the Niantic River beckons the world-weary nature lover.

The preserve, which opened in 2007, was created by the private/public partnership of the Town of East Lyme and the Friends of the Oswegatchie Hills Nature Preserve (FOHNP). The all-volunteer nonprofit group provides stewardship of the existing preserve and seeks to acquire more of the adjoining hills to protect the fragile ecosystem of the forest terrain and Niantic estuary.

One of the largest swaths of open space along Connecticut's highly developed shoreline, the 470-acre preserve of undeveloped hillside terrain has more than three miles of walking and hiking trails. These pass through an abandoned pink granite quarry, lead to rocky ledges and overlooks of the river, views of Smith Cove and moments of solitude with native plants and wildlife. There's also Clark Pond, a tree-lined pool at the preserve's southern end and the main entrance, next to Veterans Memorial Field, off of Route 161.

As with any real estate, curb appeal matters. Two years ago, the preserve's management council decided the main entrance needed some sprucing up.

"This is our gateway, this is the main entrance to the preserve, so we want this space to be inviting," said Greg Decker, FOHNP vice president and chair of the stewardship committee. "It should look good and say to the public that this place is well kept and managed properly. It says 'Welcome.'"

What started out as a "little project" - a few native plants and wildflowers around the entrance kiosk - turned into a much larger undertaking, one designed to solve a pesky soil erosion problem exacerbated by vehicle traffic and parking at the heavily-used town ball field.

"There was nothing there to hold the soil in place, so the runoff was eroding the top of the hillside and running into Clark Pond," Decker said. "Anywhere you get disturbed soil from construction or usage, that makes it ripe for invasive plants to move in."

Judy Rondeau, natural resources specialist and Niantic River Watershed coordinator for the Eastern Connecticut Conservation District, recognized the opportunity to create a conservation project, one that would help clean up runoff into the Long Island Sound and make the pond bank more appealing and useful to humans and wildlife.

The pond shoreline technically is a riparian buffer zone; these buffers are the first line of defense against the impact of land usage associated with residential, agricultural and industrial areas. Too often, native vegetation along rivers, streams and bodies of water get torn out or destroyed. Lost with the plants is a natural filtration system to keep pollutants and silt out of the water.

"Above us is a pristine, 169-acre runoff area that goes into the Niantic River," Decker said. "It's unique in this area to have such an undeveloped watershed like this, so it's important that we protect it."

It wasn't only recent human activity that disrupted the western slope of Clark Pond, which was created years ago by the enterprising Clark family who owned the land. They dammed the stream so they could harvest the ice and sell it to ships in the Niantic fishing fleet. Circa-1905 photos from East Lyme Town Historian Liz Kuchta show horse-drawn sleds pulling the ice blocks down to the docks.

Back in the day, the pond also served as a public ice skating rink, Decker said. Early on in the project,

volunteers unearthed a couple of old guard rails mired along the shoreline.

Rondeau suggested getting rid of the invasive plants and thorny brambles on the slope and replacing them with native plants that would feed and support terrestrial and aquatic wildlife and plants. The space would be a lot more pleasant for hikers, too. Decker, a CT-DEEP Master Wildlife Conservationist who runs the research boats for the environmental labs at Millstone Power Station, wondered where he'd find a landscaper who would know what to do and what to plant.

"So, I sat down next to some guy at the Save the River-Save the Hills annual pasta and song fundraiser at Flanders Fish Market a couple of years ago, and he turned out to be a landscape architect who specializes in native plants and fixing soil erosion along the shoreline," Decker said. "Talk about fate."

Drew Kenny, who lives in East Lyme and earned his degree in landscape architecture at UConn, volunteered his services to create the landscape plan and help with the planting. He designed a meandering path through a wildflower meadow and plantings of bird-friendly native shrubs for the 250-by-100-foot sloping shoreline.

Kenny's design incorporates almost 300 native shrubs. Some were planted last year. Last Saturday, about 15 volunteers put in the last 87 plants, silky dogwoods and shadblow serviceberry. A landscape plan at the kiosk indicates what has been planted and how the plantings tie in with existing oak and sumac.

"The whole waterside edge is planted with native species. There's also bayberry, clethra and grey dogwood," he said. "We used Eastern red cedar as anchor plants to guide people through the area; the bayberry highlight the entrance and access to the bank-side."

Some 30 pounds of wildflower seeds, sown last spring, have become a wildflower meadow; many of these species develop deep roots that will help secure the soil. Paths will be mowed through the meadow and around the shrubs.

Kenny, who has taught landscape design and architecture classes at UConn, opened his own landscape design and installation firm, Outdoor Lifestyles, in East Lyme earlier this year and has been installing landscapes from New Haven to Stonington. He says he's been involved in so many erosion control and repair projects along the shoreline over the years that it has turned into a niche.

"This project is my interest in being connected with the community," said Kenny. "Native plants are the way to go, whether you'd doing it along a wetland or

in your back yard. A lot of people are torn between thinking they have to have gardens and perennial beds verses having a nice simple outdoor living space. You're going to be better off with the native plants for easy maintenance."

Before any of the new planting could be done, the invasive and thorny plants had to be removed; plants like Asiatic bittersweet, multiflora rose, Japanese barberry, poison ivy and catbrier or smilax, also notoriously deep-rooted and thorny. Because of the wetlands and proximity to water, the East Lyme Inland Wetlands Agency required that these be removed mechanically or by hand. No chemical herbicides were allowed. Topsoil had to be replaced or added once the weeds came out. A silt fence held in the soil while grass and wildflowers got established.

Then there was the arduous task of digging and prepping almost 300 holes for the shrubs and trees, no small feat considering the established tree roots and other shoreline vegetation.

The work has been done by volunteers, including FOHNP members, the newly reconstituted East Lyme and Niantic Land Trust and East Lyme Girl Scouts Troop 63800. The Town of East Lyme has organized teams of J.B. Correctional Institution inmates to help, too. The town's highway and parks and recreation departments have donated time and equipment to remove invasive plants, dig holes for planting the native shrubs and bring in and position 20 boulders to help define the walk path through the wildflowers.

"We couldn't have planted these without East Lyme's new post-hole digger," said Decker, who is also chief waterer of the transplanted shrubs, a critical step for plant survival.

"Greg has been the driving force for this project since day one," said Richard Gallagher, fellow board member of FOHNP, who helped prep many of the holes for the young plants. "He puts so much time and effort into this preserve."

Grants and donations funded the plant purchases. FOHNP received a \$1,000 grant from the New England Grassroots Environmental Fund, the Town of East Lyme was awarded the Les Mehrhoff plant biodiversity preservation grant from the Connecticut Wetland Scientists, also \$1,000, and the Dominion Nuclear Connecticut Foundation donated \$2,500.

Although the majority of the heaving lifting, digging and planting is over, Decker says volunteers will be sprucing up the entrance area with a few more plants.

"We also want to put up some educational signs, telling people what was done and why," said Decker.

The nature preserve is open to the public and welcomes school groups and educational tours. See www.oswhills.org for trail maps and more

information. For more landscaping ideas, see Drew Kenny's Outdoor Lifestyles page on Facebook.