

From the community: Brushwood Center garden restored: Volunteers keep native plants thriving for visitors, wildlife

By Community Contributor Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods

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Leigh Stewart, Sandy Sass and Barb Thompson snipped, weeded and talked plants over a cup of coffee behind Brushwood Center on a cool, blue-sky morning.

They worked amid the orange-hued butterflyweed, soft purple -colored liatris and sunny yellow coreopsis at the restored garden behind Brushwood Center, as a ruby-throated hummingbird zipped by.

These volunteers call themselves the Brushwood Wild Bunch, and they're working to keep the native plant garden in bloom from spring through autumn.

"We're a fun-loving team of volunteers who enjoy being and digging together, along with appropriate beverage," Buffalo Grove resident Stewart said. That means coffee for the early morning work days and wine for the early evening work sessions.

When she started working on the garden several years ago, Stewart said, "It was mostly grass and some vine-y stuff going up the walls. It didn't look that good."

But with Stewart's help and encouragement from Brushwood Center Executive Director Sophie Twichell, the gardens have been restored using mostly native plants. At first they considered tidying up, but soon, with a \$1,000 Lincolnshire Garden Club grant and help from two professional native landscapers, they dug into a bigger project. Eagle Scouts as well as young people from the Lake County Juvenile Detention Center helped dig up the old beds and prepare the new beds to welcome a host of native plants to their new home.

"We've got asters and nodding wild onions, wild petunia and Pennsylvania sedge and blue-eyed grass," Stewart said. They're even growing bottle gentian, a true prairie native with deep purple blooms that can be difficult to grow.

The Wild Bunch plan workdays to water and weed the beds, as well as to keep weeds from growing in the crevices of the brick pathway, a task Sass of Lindenhurst busily pursued that recent morning.

Stewart said she's learned a lot about native plants and ways to grow them by volunteering at the garden. "You really have to understand their growth habits and what other plants they like around them," she said. "We've made mistakes," she said, for example, side oats grama, a native grass, doesn't seem to like it too well at the garden. And even natives, like wild columbine and violets, can get a bit too prolific for an estate garden that requires somewhat of a manicured look, she said. So Stewart removes some of them, promising more will bloom again next spring.

"The restored garden is a wonderful back drop for the gatherings of all kinds that are hosted in and around the Brushwood historic home from intimate weddings to large receptions, from corporate meetings to spiritual retreats," Twichell said.

"Visitors linger on the benches in quiet contemplation. Birders and hikers often stop by; and painters and photographers use the grounds as their classroom."

There they can watch nature unfold.

"Bees love the St. John's wort," Stewart said. "When the St. John's wort is in bloom, it's a wonderful hum. It's like

the flight of the bumblebees."

One spring day Twichell watched a migratory songbird, the scarlet tanager, feast on the buzzing insects. The tanager is one of many birds that live in the neotropics and fly to Ryerson Woods and farther north to breed in summer.

"That's the whole plan - attracting wildlife," Stewart said.

The Wild Bunch welcomes volunteers to help with autumn cleanup. Workdays are scheduled through the end of October. For more information, email lmstewart17@gmail.com.

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