

by Meredith Tucker

Fire fascinates. It terrifies. It destroys. It also rejuvenates and begets life, new growth, new beginnings. Like the phoenix rising from the flames, so too our natural landscapes are resurrected by fire. Land managers, restorationists, and devotees of native plants and landscapes recognize the inestimable value of fire as a management tool. It is the most important weapon in the land manager's arsenal of restoration methods.

Before European settlement in the Chicago area, the natural landscape encompassed tall grass prairie, savanna, and wetlands. Prairie and eastern woodland converged in this region, an area which was glaciated by the Wisconsin ice sheet, forming a huge expanse of marshes, bogs, and other wetlands. The region was home to lush masses of assorted life forms. It is northeastern Illinois' greatest gift that such a diverse assortment of communities and ecosystems existed here. A desert is a desert; open ocean is open ocean, but this region was a rich and luxuriant assortment of plants and wildlife, each with its own ecological niche. Before the advent of European settlement, fire maintained these landscapes. Some fires ignited naturally; others were set by the native Americans who used fire to herd game but also to renew the prairies and woodlands on which they relied for sustenance. Fire was indispensable for sustaining the land, its flora and fauna. Of course, the land has changed drastically since then. The extensive wetlands have been drained and the beavers mostly extirpated, leaving bare remnants; the tall grass prairie has been developed; the savannas have been denuded and developed as well.

However, in the Barrington area, far-seeing residents have protected a substantial number of these habitats. The Barrington environs include nature preserves, forest preserves, horse farms, and large residential tracts that have been protected from commercial and high-density residential development. The acreage includes prairie, savanna, and wetlands. Nevertheless, the time has passed when one can allow nature to take its course and let natural areas follow the unguided path of evolution. All of the existent natural properties are fragmented and disturbed. Even the most pristine properties are bounded by areas of development, areas containing invasive alien plants and disturbed hydrology. These properties must be managed or their ecosystems will perish. Perhaps the foremost threat comes from exotic plants which have escaped cultivation and threaten to submerge native landscapes in non-native trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants.

Local residents, private landscapers, volunteers for conservation organizations, and employees of government agencies work to keep alien species from overrunning native landscapes. They spray with herbicides. They hand-pull small weeds. They cut trees and shrubs. All of these methods are useful, but none can successfully

oust the non-natives without the help of fire. Most alien species are unaccustomed to living with fire and succumb to it, but because our native plants evolved with flames, many thrive with fire management. Bur oaks and shagbark hickories prosper when the savannas burn with the ground-hugging fire that clears the forest floor of dry leaves and invading weeds. The oaks' thick, fire-resistant bark is undamaged by fire. Wildflowers bloom in the openings fire creates, and young oaks can germinate and grow without the encumbrance of alien honeysuckle and buckthorn.

Prairie fires are every bit as vital as woodland fires. Flames consume the large quantities of dead grass allowing sunlight to reach the soil and warm it early in the spring, extending the length of the growing season for



## CFC recognized for 35 years of service to Barrington area

CFC was both surprised and pleased when the Barrington Area Council of Governments (BACOG) presented us with a resolution in honor of our thirty-fifth anniversary. They conferred the framed document at their April 25, 2006, meeting and thanked CFC for its years of service to the Barrington communities. In particular the resolution noted our contributions to preserving natural areas and open space as well as our involvement in environmental education. Thank you, BACOG; we very much appreciate your thoughtful recognition of our efforts.

# Restoration at Deer Grove Forest Preserve

by Ron Vargason

**Editor's Note: CFC sees hope for the future of local nature and ecosystems in the work of other groups of dedicated volunteers pursuing restoration in nearby preserves. Together we can make a difference!**

Nearby at the Deer Grove Forest Preserve is a group named the Deer Grove Natural Areas Volunteers. They are supported by and work under the authority of The Nature Conservancy's Volunteer Stewardship Network (VSN) and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Led by co-stewards Pete Jackson and Ron Vargason, this small but hearty group has been working for the past eleven years to restore the native plant and animal communities to pre-settlement conditions.

Deer Grove is an oak-hickory woodland with savanna remnants, a few small prairie openings, some diverse high-quality wetlands, and a delicate ravine system containing mesic forest components. Much of the restoration work has involved removing invasive plants such as buckthorn, honeysuckle, multi-flora rose, and garlic mustard. Volunteers also work to enhance indigenous plant communities by collecting, processing and planting seeds. Seed gathering has been slow as it is restricted to high-quality remnants within Deer Grove.

Restoration focus has been on two principle areas. One is a former oak savanna on the east side of the marsh seen along Ela Road. The area is choked with exotics but still contains a few rare prairie plants which should flourish as the area is opened. The other area of focus is more central and north, adjacent to the central ravine. There woodland and stream bank areas have been open for eight to ten years and have a wonderful variety of plants including fire pink, several species of rare native vetches, cardinal flowers, fringed loosestrife and germander.

Salt Creek East Branch and Buffalo Creek flow through the preserve. Salt Creek creates an extensive but delicate ravine system with mesic forest components. Along many of the protected banks one can find wonderful spring ephemerals and, within the meandering marshy cuts, cardinal flowers and great lobelia.

These streams with their occasionally steep banks also attract mountain bikers. The Forest Preserve District has made a significant investment to restore one section of badly degraded ravine. They installed over three-quarters of a mile of perimeter fence, plantings, erosion control structures, seeding, and deer protection. The objective is to help the ravine heal itself by keeping traffic out and stabilizing the most severely eroded slopes by

slowing rain water as it runs down the slope. The District is experimenting with low cost, minimally invasive methods of achieving restoration goals in hopes of applying what works best throughout other preserves.

Present stewards are slowly piecing together the history of Deer Grove from early plats that show long, narrow wood lots people kept as a source of fire wood. The streams that provide for a diversity of ecosystems kept this rugged terrain from being farmed.

For more information visit the website at: <http://bakhome.northstarnet.org/deergrove>. You will also find pictures of a few of those rare plants.

## Native plant sale helps Barrington area gardeners

by Karen Hunter

Citizens for Conservation's Native Plant, Tree and Shrub Sale has once again proven to be a successful fundraiser. This spring's sale generated nearly \$8,000 to help CFC continue Saving Living Space for Living Things.

Especially after last year's drought, people are searching for native prairie plants that can withstand Barrington's extreme weather conditions. Gardeners are beginning to appreciate the value of holding water on their property and are adding rain gardens.

CFC also used the event to bring garlic mustard, the highly invasive weed, to the shopper's attention. We displayed potted garlic mustard plants to help people identify this botanical bully and carefully disposed of the plants after the sale.

Our thanks to all the native gardeners who make this event a success.

