

PROVIDENCE | RESTORING NATURE'S BALANCE



The return of the natives



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Sally Harman, a landscape designer, places mountain laurel in a patch of the Blackstone Park Conservation District that had been overrun by invasives but is now being restored with native plants. Above, URI master gardener Maria Cook takes part in the restoration.

Cleared of invasive plants, riverfront gets back to its roots

By **KAREN LEE ZINER**
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PROVIDENCE — A year and a half ago, a woody slope overlooking the Seekonk River “was nothing more than a tangle of Oriental bittersweet, Japanese barberry and poison ivy,” volunteer Anna Browder recalled last week. In short, nature had run amuck.

But human intervention is restoring the ecosystem of this patch of the Blackstone Park Conservation District with native species. The effort doubles

as a demonstration garden at Angell Street and Parkside Road, a key public entry point.

Beginning in 2010, a contractor chopped and yanked the offending invasive species and sprayed them with herbicides. And last weekend, Browder joined more than a dozen volunteers who replanted the area with lowbush blueberry, white wood aster, witch hazel, shad blow and a host of other native plants, shrubs and small trees.

The goal “is to have more species

diversity in that spot, as a way of preventing invasive species from coming back,” says Hope Leeson, botanist with the Rhode Island Natural History Survey and project co-director. “It’s also a way to show people what native plants are available in the nursery trade,” which they can use in their own gardens.

The efforts grew out of the Rhode Island Natural History Survey’s “Forest

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Health Project," financed through the American Recovery Investment Act.

The "clearing of the canvas" took a year. Dave Renzi, contractor and owner of Out in Front Horticulture, said loppers, pruners and hand-pulling "minimized disturbance" and lessened the amount of herbicide required for the job. The Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council approved the herbicides.

Because the area adjoins the Seekonk River, the CRMC's coastal buffer zone management "requires that you re-vegetate with native plants," Davis said.

Of the 1,100 native plants that now dot the slope, "the majority were sourced from local seed material," Davis said. Local growers propagated the seed, as part of the "Rhody Native" initiative, and "the rest were sourced from as close within New England as we could."

Landscape architect Sally Harman volunteered her skills. She paired lowbush blueberry and witch hazel in the foreground. Winged sumac, pink-flowering native rhododendron and service berry will populate the mid-range; in the background, mountain laurel, spicebush, bayberry and highbush blueberry.

"I'm hoping this will form a very nice understory of shrubs, and the Rhody Native program is providing a lot of perennials," Harman said. "It should be a nice low, interesting understory where currently there's very little," Harman said. "It's a very cool project, and I think it's going to be beautiful if we can just keep the invasives at bay."

The Blackstone Parks Conservancy will monitor the area and pull up any invasive seedlings that return.

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Landscape architect Sally Harman

Last Friday, plant pots arrayed according to Harman's design rested on a bed of slippery leaves that form a vegetative shield against invasive roots.

Marcia Peña, a member of the Rhode Island Wild Plant Society, joined the ranks of volunteers. Her task: planting gray goldenrod.

"I enjoy nature-related projects, Peña said. "I've done a lot of invasives pulling, but I've never done a restoration project."

Tilting her head toward the tree canopy, Peña said, "We have to look up at the sky, and plant where there's an opening, because it [the goldenrod] needs sun."

Other volunteers included master gardeners and members of the Blackstone Parks Conservancy, which includes



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Landscape designer Sally Harman places native plants in their proper locations for planting. At far left is Hope Leeson, a botanist with the Rhode Island Natural History Survey and co-director of the project to restore the woody riverfront slope.

the Blackstone Boulevard park.

The lavender-flowered native wild lupine planted on the slope owes its existence to a fortuitous discovery more than two decades ago.

Charles Brown, principal wildlife biologist with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's division of fish and wildlife, harvested seeds from "a little patch" of the lupine on the banks of the Seekonk River in East Providence — across from the newly replanted site.

"I still have the progeny growing in my garden," Brown said. "I'd say it's a fairly rare plant," which typically grows in dry sand bar-



Dave Renzi, of North Kingstown, slides flats of plants from his truck as others pick them up for planting.

rens and pitch pine barrens. Brown said the area in East Providence where he originally found the plant has since "been shredded by motorcycles and ATVs," and destroyed by debris and garbage. The lupine population "just blinked out."

Told last week that the

lupine he rescued will be used on the slope, Brown said, "It's awesome."

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