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Living On The Edge

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The following article was written by my fellow colleague, and friend, Lynn Barnickol. It is used with permission of the Missouri Society of American Foresters, who contracted with Lynn to write a number of news releases that encourage people to manage their forest resources for multiple benefits, and offers advice on how to do so. This piece tells the story about what Lynn and his wife did with their backyard forest located on the edge of Jefferson City, Missouri. Some of the actions Lynn took can be replicated on many urban and suburban home sites. I recommend it highly, and hope you'll give it a look.

Living on the Edge

The Missouri Society of American Foresters believes that we all can have a huge and positive effect on trees, wildlife, and insects. Even if you live in an apartment, on a neighborhood lot, or on a farm there are plenty of things to do that do not have to be expensive or involve large expanses of land. Flowering plants, shrubs, and trees attract migratory birds, bees, and butterflies. Even apartment dwellers may provide a potted flowering plant on a deck, a window box of flowering plants, or a bird feeder. Our food chain depends on bees and butterflies to help pollinate crops. Birds are effective in helping to control destructive insects. Trees and shrubs provide nesting and roosting habitat and at the same time provide summer shade for our homes. Here are some examples of how I am approaching care of my trees, wildlife, and insect habitat.

The main feature of our home, situated on less than an acre of ground but nestled into the woods, is the trees; mainly short-bodied post oaks, a couple of taller black oaks, and shagbark hickories. By looking at the vegetation when we moved in, we identified several habitats. Part of the yard was shaded, part was dappled shade, and on another part full sunlight. We thought we had the beginning of interesting habitats. We get a nice variety of birds at our feeders, especially during the migration periods.

As a forester I knew the best use of these trees was shade for the house and dens for squirrels and woodpeckers. Trees create a lot of leaves, but they get collected, providing exercise and compost.

Three post oaks, measuring about 8 inches in diameter at the stump, were cut because the trees were too crowded. By counting the growth rings, I found that the trees were 90 years old. Growth had been slow but steady. I cut an 18 inch diameter, dying black oak for firewood and determined it was 60 years old.

Basically we had a wooded lot with three ages of trees; post oaks 90 years, the black oaks at about 60 years, and some oak seedlings. The openings created by thinning the oaks provide more open space between the remaining trees and helps the surrounding trees remain healthy. We also have a steep, south facing slope, receiving lots of sunlight, that behaves like a glade. Rather than mow we decided to make a woodland and glade area with native, flowering plants.

Fortunately, we live near a nursery selling native wild flowers, grasses, trees and shrub seedlings. We have noted that the native plants establish and grow nearly effortlessly.

To make life interesting, we have replaced a collapsed retaining wall and corrected some drainage issues. By adding a dry creek, a shallow trench lined with a weed barrier fabric and course rock, water is directed away from the house. We replaced the timbered wall with a rock wall. To expand an existing garden pool we added a wet creek, a shallow trench about 30 feet long that's lined with rubberized pond liner and

gravel. Water is pumped through a tube buried in the gravel to the upper end of the creek where it tumbles and eddies back down a gradual slope.

Our wooded lot is taking shape. We have four miniature habitats with trees as the dominant feature. The north side of the house is a moist shade garden featuring native plants. The openings in the woods feature native plants that attract birds and bees, the south facing slope features native grasses and flowering plants that are unique to glade habitat and beneficial to birds. The wet creek, shaded and lined with native plants and shrubs, was a surprise to us. During a spring morning, we had 20 species of birds using the wet creek. Not all the migratory birds have arrived so we hope to get a higher count.

To sum it up, we do some typical yard maintenance like mowing and leaf raking. The wet creek will take some maintenance to prevent algae formation and an occasional cleaning. However, it's interesting to watch the birds frolic in the wet creek like kids in a water park. Located at the edge of town, the benefits of our wooded lot include shade for the house, reducing cooling bills, and enjoying the relaxing atmosphere.

If you would like to take action to care for your trees and plants, animals, and insects here are some links for habitat information: <http://mdc.mo.gov/your-property/wildlife-your-property/backyard-wildlife> , for Missouri land owners this link provides some details about forest management: http://mdc.mo.gov/sites/default/files/resources/2010/05/5574_3489.pdf . Additionally the Forest and Woodland Association of Missouri provides an informational web site for anyone interested in our forests and woodlands: <http://www.forestandwoodland.org/> .

If you do not use a computer please call your local Missouri Department of Conservation office, or the State Forester at 573-751-4115.

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About MOSAF

MOSAF is the Missouri state unit of the Society of American Foresters, a professional society with the following objectives:

- to advance the science, education, technology, and practice of forestry;
- to enhance the competency of its members;
- to establish professional excellency;
- and to use the knowledge, skills, and conservation ethic of the profession to ensure the continued health and use of forest ecosystems and the present and future availability of forest resources to benefit society.
- For more information about MOSAF see <http://www.mosaf.net/>