



Garden Curator's Notes

By Susan Wilkins



Now that the role of President of Friends of the Wild Flower Garden has officially changed hands, I'd like to send a whole-hearted thank you to Pam Weiner and a warm welcome to Kathy Connelly. Pam's wise leadership, compassionate and steady stance, skillful navigation of complex issues and capacity to take the long view have benefited the Garden greatly over the past ten years. It's been a true pleasure to work with her, and I anticipate an equally fruitful collaboration with Kathy. I appreciate Kathy's depth of knowledge of the natural world, her readiness to address new challenges and embrace change, and her intelligent approach to leadership.

In a fresh direction for my Letters in The Fringed Gentian, I want to reveal more about the inner workings of the Garden, how I think about this special place and what drives the work and decisions here. To start, I'd like to share with you a broader understanding I have come to on changes I've observed in the Garden.

How do we feel about nature?

I wrestle with the tension between an ideal of the natural world and a practical knowledge of how these 15 acres function. An insight I have gained over the years is that we are a self-referential species: we believe our particular view of the world is a good summation of how nature is supposed to be. This approach often plays out as a desire to keep things the same or perhaps return to a simpler, more unspoiled time. It gives us a certain sense of security and stability, even moral resolve. The problem is that this is a static view of nature.

Nature to its very core is the epitome of change.

I have observed here at the Garden that nature is anything but static. There are the changes that we expect and accept, like winter into spring and an oak seedling growing into a tree. There are the changes that we don't consent to, like the presence of buckthorn and invasive earthworms in our forests and the very natural shift, over time,

of the composition of plants in a woodland, meadow or bog. To find a starting point for clearer observation and decision-making, one has to let go, if only for a moment, the perception of change as a good or bad force and simply see change as the force that it is, subtly and vividly at work in the natural world.

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Change is reshaping the places we love.

I admit I generally don't like change when it comes to the places I love. Here at the Garden, for instance, I like the forests to look and behave in ways that are familiar and to my liking: a healthy layer of leaf litter all season long; soft supple soil under the duff; an abundance of wildflowers, ferns, sedges, grasses, shrubs and trees; everything regenerating on its own with no invasive plants. But that's not what I see. The forests aren't behaving! The soils show bare by mid-summer, sometimes compacted and dry, many forest species

are not regenerating and invasive plants are continually popping up.

Why? Relatively new factors like invasive plants and earthworms are infiltrating the forest, making conditions more inhospitable to native plants. Nature will continue to change in the "natural" ways we expect – e.g. forest succession and seasonal transformation – but in addition we are experiencing a host of other changes which bring new conditions to grapple with and will in turn influence the "natural" changes.

So what are we doing?

Our best position for realizing the goals we've created for this revered space is to be thoughtful and educated stewards of change – all change. We work to understand the significance and the impacts of known changes that are occurring. We continue to manage the actions we have already put in place to counter adverse changes, such as our highly effective efforts to control invasive buckthorn and garlic mustard. We anticipate and prepare for more changes, thoughtfully implementing adaptive management practices that are forward thinking.

Through it all, we endeavor to be creative and dexterous in bringing about the best possible outcomes for the ongoing spirit and vitality of the Garden. This all matters so much because we need these natural places and wild garden spaces to be healthy, dynamic, diverse and beautiful. They nourish us in a way that nothing else can. ❁



Natural Resources Specialist Chee Yang heads into the Garden to remove narrow leaf cattail, an invasive species in the wetland.

photo: Betsy McNemey