

Nursery gives nature a helping hand

Nonprofit group aims to replenish native plants in Washington region

BY KALI SCHUMITZ
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For about a decade, Chris and Lisa Bright have led hundreds of volunteers in an effort to preserve and replenish the Washington region's native plant species.

"We really rampantly destroyed our environment. . . . What you see is hideous, invasive vines and invasive plants. I cannot leave this kind of legacy behind," Lisa Bright said.

The heart of the Fairfax couple's nonprofit, Earth Sangha, is a wild plant nursery in Franconia Park that it has operated since 2001. Its staff and community volunteers collect and clean seeds from wild plants and cultivate the seedlings, which will be planted in parks, gardens and back yards.

The group works with more than 180 species of native trees, shrubs, vines and plants, which serve as the foundation of a healthy ecosystem, the Brights said, because they support the insects, birds and other fauna native to this area.

The Brights founded Earth Sangha in 1997 as a Buddhist meditation group with a focus on environmental action. Sangha is a Buddhist term meaning congregation or community.

They always wanted it to be more than a way to practice their faith, Chris Bright said, but it took a few years to get the environmental aspect up and running. The wild plant nursery in Franconia Park was their first major project.

When they founded Earth Sangha, Chris Bright was working as a researcher for the Worldwatch Institute, an international environmental organization, but wanted to do something more hands-on with an effect locally.

"I had become increasingly impatient with my own life because there wasn't a way for me to make a tangible difference," Chris Bright said.

With county-provided land and low startup costs — the seeds are collected from wild plants — Earth Sangha began its wild plant nursery. In exchange for the free land, Earth Sangha supplies native plants to the Fairfax County Park Authority for general restoration projects.

The nursery grows about 40,000 plants representing at least 150 native plant species.

"The native plants belong here. They're



PHOTOS BY SHAMUS IAN FATZINGER/FAIRFAX COUNTY TIMES

Philip Latasa waters native monarda plants at the Earth Sangha wild plant nursery at Franconia Park in Springfield. The nonprofit group runs the nursery as part of its efforts to restore native species to Washington area gardens and parks.

part of our natural and cultural heritage," Chris Bright said.

Most of the plants are used in ecological restoration projects in county and national parks in the region, such as the Meadowood Recreation Area on the Mason Neck peninsula. The nonprofit also holds a plant sale twice a year to allow the general public to buy its plants.

Buddhism remains an integral part of Earth Sangha's mission. Lisa Bright leads weekly meditation sittings in Alexandria, and the couple's environmental activism is intertwined with their faith in what they call "green Buddhism."

In addition to cultivating the plants, Earth Sangha volunteers help carry out restoration projects and manage the 20-acre Marie Butler Levin Preserve in McLean. The native arboretum project at the preserve is the result of a 2004 partnership with the Fairfax County Park Authority. The goal is to create a "botanical library" of native plants and to promote "ecological literacy."

The organization also supports a program in the Dominican Republic that helps to restore the native tree canopy and supports coffee farmers.

More than 500 volunteers lend a hand each year, making it possible for Earth Sangha to operate on a budget of



Latasa transplants indigo plants. They were grown from seeds gathered in local parks and woodlands.

\$150,000 to \$200,000 per year, which primarily comes from grants and individual donations. Both the Brights are employees of the organization, and they employ three staff members for their local operations and one in the Dominican Republic.

The large volunteer base makes it possible for Earth Sangha to coordinate

restoration projects for the Park Authority.

"This kind of work is extremely labor-intensive," Chris Bright said. "There is just no way they could pay enough people to do this."

Vienna resident Elizabeth Burke volunteers at the nursery every Wednesday and helps with restoration projects when she has time. She appreciates that volunteers are able to help on their own schedules, and that people of all ages and ability levels are able to contribute in some way.

And the friendly dynamic among the group certainly doesn't hurt, either.

"It's pretty social. It doesn't feel like you're just by yourself doing something," Burke said. "It doesn't feel like work."

Lisa Bright said she is heartened by the enthusiasm of her volunteers, especially the young people who come to work with Earth Sangha. Working on hands-on projects gives people a new appreciation for the environment around them, she said.

"People need to change their relationship to the natural world," she said. "They should just come out, experience very differently touching the soil and touching the plants."

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