

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE EARTH SANGHA

THE ACORN

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WOULD A PLANT GRANT HELP?

It's Matt's idea, so let him try to explain it:

Over the past two years, we've greatly expanded our propagation efforts in the DC area, in large part due to our use of the Fairfax County Park Authority greenhouse in Chantilly. Greenhouse production has packed our Wild Plant Nursery with native, local-ecotype plants ready for restoration projects. That added capacity has allowed us to increase support for projects on over 50 local schoolyards, in dozens of natural areas managed by Fairfax County and other local jurisdictions — and still have plenty of stock to offer local gardeners at our Open House events.

At the same time, more and more "Friends of" groups seem to be springing up. Some of these groups are focused on a single major park, like Huntley Meadows or Dyke Marsh. Others take a more distributed approach, working within a general area, like the Accotink Creek drainage. In that same vein, many other groups are getting involved in conservation as a secondary goal. Scouting groups, PTAs, and other civic organizations with primarily social missions are increasingly seeing environmental work as part of their portfolio.

These are all heartening signs, especially at a time when good news seems to be in short supply. Whatever their approach, these groups almost always depend on volunteer labor and have tight budgets. Oftentimes, their funding for any specific project may be limited to a single grant. As a small non-profit that got started in the same grassroots environment, we understand the struggle, and we want to help make these groups as effective as possible, so we're setting up a Plant Grant system that will help these groups double their efforts. Stated simply, for every qualified plant purchased by a group working on Fairfax County public lands, we will donate another plant.

In some ways, this will imitate our relationship with local government agencies. Every year, these agencies buy thousands of dollars' worth of plants from us — but every year, we also donate thousands of dollars' worth of plants to them, to support low-budget projects. This arrangement is very flexible and has proved to be very durable. We want to do something similar for smaller community groups.

We're proposing a kind of matching grant to any group — "friends of," non-profit, school-based, church-based, whatever — that is

working with permission on public lands in Fairfax County. For those of you working on non-county owned properties, take heart! We are eager to continue assisting you, but, in order to make sure we can meet demand, we will initially limit ourselves to our home jurisdiction, which has hosted our propagation efforts for many years.

To take advantage of the Plant Grant, you must apply ahead of time and have your project accepted by us. We're planning two application periods per year, one for spring planting and one for the fall. Application and reporting requirements will be minimal — just a letter of support from the relevant agency, a site description, a proposed plant list, volunteer outreach plans, and before and after photos. We will help adjust your plant list and even promote the event itself.

Various caveats, of course, apply. The supply of free plants will vary from season to season, so we probably won't be able to approve every worthwhile application. We will retain final say on species choices and quantities, in part to ease logistics at the nursery, but also to ensure that all plants are suitable for their intended sites. School-yard Kits will not be eligible because Kit prices are already steeply discounted. But the Grant could apply to projects that are extending or complementing a Kit that has already been purchased.

A couple of points to make right at the outset: no project is too small. There is no *a priori* cap on the number of groups that we will work with, or the number of projects. It's just a matter of how much our nursery can produce. If we have the stock available and ready to go, then we want to see it back out on public lands where it belongs — where these plants can return to their ecological roles in perpetuity. If your group could use a Plant Grant, keep an eye on our website and emails. This winter, we'll roll out the application for the first round of grants, for spring 2018.

— Matt Bright, Conservation Manager

Photo: Katie Crate, our talented and energetic summer intern, kept the water flowing at our DC-Area Wild Plant Nursery in July. Katie did a phenomenal job and we hope that, in one way or another, she'll continue her work in conservation.



IS THIS REALLY THE BEST WE CAN DO?

Just this summer, we lost one of our region's best stands of mature serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*) and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*) over a stretch of several miles on the Mason Neck peninsula. And we lost it to a "scenic trail" project! I've seen this kind of thing happen many times, in the 17 years that I've spent exploring northern Virginia's forests and meadows.

Several years ago, we lost the only habitat that I knew of in Fairfax County for striped gentian (*Gentiana villosa*) — through a clumsy forest-restoration project in a state park. Since then, I had been driving out to Prince William County to see this species, at a site near Manassas Battlefield. When I went out there this spring, hoping to find it, I discovered that the site had been obliterated by a townhouse development.

Visitors to our nursery often admire the blooms of shaggy blazing star (*Liatris pilosa*), but our guests are usually surprised to hear that this species has nearly been extirpated from the wild in our region. It occurs naturally only in dry, sandy soil in the coastal plain. We know of only a few remnant populations — and the reason there aren't more is that coastal flats are ideal for development.

Why should this be surprising? Maybe because the fraying of natural areas unfolds over decades and involves types of change that people may not recognize. Take the scenic trail damage. That serviceberry stand was spectacular, especially when the trees were in bloom or in fruit. But even though their destruction was sudden and quite visible, my guess is that most people would not have recognized it as an ecological threat: "Too bad they cut those trees, but at least there are plenty more."

Even harder to see is the gradual degradation that will almost certainly follow. Trail construction has opened up the woodland edge and damaged the roots of adjacent vegetation; in response, the native trees and shrubs will probably die back slowly, and various invasive alien plants will make their way in. So instead of serviceberry, we might see more and more callery pear (*Pyrus calleryana*), a thicket-forming invasive tree. Other invasives will likely appear in the ground-layer. This woodland's magnificent oak-hickory canopy shelters extensive patches of huckleberry and blueberry (*Gaylussacia* and *Vaccinium* spp.), interspersed here and there with clumps of mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). Like many ericads (plants in the heath and heather family), these shrubs grow slowly and their seed does not germinate readily. They are unlikely to continue to dominate the

understory once the invasives really get started. It may not seem like much — shaving off a few thousand square feet of forest here and there — but the effects can be profound and very hard to reverse.

I could fill many pages with examples like these, but you get the idea. So here we are, in one of the richest parts of one of the richest countries on Earth, and this is the best that we can do? How could it be that we have so little regard for these other beings — these plants and animals who have lived here for thousands of years, who do us no harm, and who ask so little from us? Get to know a local stream or woodland and you'll see the results of all the little lies and self-deceptions that we use to hedge in our prosperity: the polluted runoff from all of that asphalt and concrete, the truckloads' worth of trash gone astray (including some plastics that must have a half-life measured in centuries), the obliteration of hundreds of acres of forest and field every year for more churches, supermarkets, and townhouses — surely you must wonder, as I often do, where this will end. And then there are the remedies, which are usually too small to do much good, or sometimes even make things worse: generic planting projects done without even bothering to examine the remnant flora on site; stream "restoration" projects that convert battered but still living channels into static courses of riprap; and of course, lots of trails.

We have got to do better than this. We need to move beyond "green space" and create a real conservation agenda. I'm a naturalist, not a policy wonk, so I don't know what that would look like, but I do know that what we have is definitely not it.

— Lisa Bright, Executive Director

Photos: Above, that distant figure is Lisa examining an erosion-control planting in September, beside a new asphalt trail along Gunston Road, in Fairfax County, Virginia. The trail obliterated a mature serviceberry stand. The planting is of foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*), an alien grass. As with several other *Setaria* species, this one can be invasive. At right (and from the left), Matt, Cosme, Franklin, and Manolo pause for a photo op in August, at the Tree Bank's main nursery in Los Cerezos, Dominican Republic. Cosme and Manolo are Tree Bank Co-Directors; Franklin is our chief nursery hand. At far right, Cosme points to a seedling of the native West Indian mahogany (*Swietenia mahogani*). On Hispaniola, there are few if any large, wild specimens of this tree left. For this species, we are always looking for more wild seed.

UPDATES: TREE BANK & MARIE BUTLER LEVEN HOUSE

In August, Matt and I paid a short visit to our Tree Bank program area, along the Dominican Republic / Haiti border. We wanted to talk to our farmer colleagues about many of the various Tree Bank projects that, together, are now protecting some 300 acres of forest. But we had a particular interest in discussing our Bosques Rentables (Profitable Forests) project, which is meant to re-establish native forest canopy on low-value pasture, then under-plant that canopy with coffee and cacao (the little tree whose seeds are used to make cocoa and chocolate). These valuable shade crops should make the forests profitable.

But Bosques Rentables is not attracting as much area as we had hoped. The project started last year, but halfway through 2017, its total area was only 6.75 acres. We needed to find out why people were reluctant to commit land to the project and how we could increase the project's value. We heard about three important factors.

1. A growing interest in cattle, which tends to increase the value of pasture that might otherwise have been brought into Bosques Rentables.

2. A government ban on logging Hispaniolan pine (*Pinus occidentalis*), a large, native, and endangered tree. Many farmers still own stands of this tree. We approve of the ban, but since the pine can no longer be cut, farmers may increasingly log their broadleaf forest fragments. Those fragments are the ecological backbone of Bosques Rentables, because they are reservoirs of forest plants and animals that might one day reinhabit the replanted areas.

3. Changing attitudes towards the broadleaf fragments that once shaded the region's coffee groves. The coffee was destroyed by the leaf-rust epidemic of 2014, and that loss has reduced the perceived value of the forests that once sheltered it.

In our meetings, we decided to expand Bosques Rentables so that it includes, not just open-ground plantings, but also the replanting of the old coffee groves. In return for extending our incentive package, farmers will have to agree to conserve the native coffee canopy, and to protect and extend it by planting native-tree buffers along its edges.

For more information, read the longer version of this note on the Sangha's blog page (earthsangha.org/blog).

— Chris Bright, President



This June, Katherine and I moved into the renovated house at the Marie Butler Leven Preserve, a 20-acre park in the McLean section of Fairfax County, Virginia. (Katherine is my wife and the Sangha's Development and Outreach Coordinator.) After 13 years of work in the Preserve, we had come to see a residential presence as our best bet for realizing our mission here: restoring meadow and forest in a way that helps people appreciate the County's magnificent natural heritage.

Apparently, we were right: since June, we and our volunteers have logged over 150 hours removing a dozen pickup-truck loads of invasives and planting over 300 native plants, all donated from our nursery. Katherine and I have also been giving educational tours.

Keeping that many transplants alive during the summer heat would have been virtually impossible without living here. Katherine and I started many of our summer days by lugging watering cans throughout the park. (I'm afraid that I compounded the problem by habitually claiming the nursery's worst-looking specimens for the Preserve — for fear that no one else would want them. If you've ever volunteered at an animal shelter, you know this syndrome.)

We're also planning a very full fall planting season. There are three major events on the agenda so far: two for students from the Stone Ridge School of the Sacred Heart, and one for Volunteer Fairfax's VolunteerFest 2017. Of course, other volunteers are always welcome!

Our work at the Preserve draws on the talents of many colleagues. The landscape around the house will follow the excellent plans drawn up by Susan Abraham and her firm, LushLife Landscape Design. We owe a lot to Dave Bowden and his colleagues at the Fairfax County Park Authority. Without their guidance, there is no way that we could have pulled off the house project. And most of all, we are deeply grateful to Sophie Lynn and her husband, David Frederick, for funding virtually all of the renovations, and for Sophie's superb management skills. This was really her project, not ours.

If you would like to put your skills to work at the Preserve, please join us Fridays or Sundays, from 9:00 to 1:00, or if you're an experienced hand and would like to help lead volunteers, contact me at mbright@earthsangha.org.

— Matt Bright, Conservation Manager



EARTH SANGHA CONSERVATION IN PRACTICE

20 YEARS OLD & STILL ONE OF THE BEST!

On September 3rd, the Sangha turned 20 years old. We're still small by financial standards — but not by the standards of conservation. We have created the region's largest direct-from-nature propagation system for local native plants, and one of its largest volunteer conservation networks. We're also still "one of the best" small charities in the DC region, according to the Catalogue for Philanthropy: Greater Washington.

A project of the Harman Family Foundation, the Catalogue is the region's only locally-focused guide to charitable giving. The Catalogue vets and promotes small nonprofits (those with budgets under \$3 million), because the Catalogue believes in their power to spark big change.

After a thorough review of both our programs and our finances, the Catalogue admitted the Sangha to its Class of 2017-18. This is our fourth time in the Catalogue; our previous classes were: 2005-06, 2009-10, and 2013-14. (Charities can apply only once every four years.) The Catalogue's endorsement means that donors can be confident that we are worthy of their support.

"People want to know where to give and they need trusted information. Based on our in-depth review, we believe that the Earth Sangha is one of the best community-based nonprofits in the region," says Barbara Harman, the Catalogue's founder and president.

Our selection for the latest Catalogue Class is important — and not just as a vote of confidence. Our Catalogue donors will help us extend our work to protect the wonderful meadows, forests, and wetlands of this region.

Photo: In August, Catalina "Catana" Martinez starts work on breakfast in her family's cluttered little kitchen. Catana lives in Los Cerezos, where the Sangha's Tree Bank program is based. (See the program update inside.) Her daughter, Mari, lives with her, along with Mari's five-year-old daughter, Samali. Their cabin is the Tree Bank's home base: when Matt and Chris visit, this is where they stay. The apparent culinary disorder here may not seem promising to American eyes, but Catana and Mari are excellent cooks. The concrete counter-top and bottled-gas stove distinguish this kitchen as top-of-the-line for Los Cerezos.

The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC, area and devoted to ecological restoration. We work in the spirit of Buddhist practice, but our members and volunteers come from a wide variety of religious and secular backgrounds.

Want to contact us or make a donation? You can support our work by becoming a member. Membership starts at \$35 per year. Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check (made out to "Earth Sangha") or donate on our website. We will send you a receipt and include you in our mailings. (If your name and address are correct on your check, there is no need to send us anything else.) To donate specifically to our DC-Area programs, write "DC-Area" on the check memo line; to donate specifically to the Tree Bank, write "Tree Bank" on the memo line. [Contact us at: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707 | info@earthsangha.org | \(703\) 764-4830](mailto:info@earthsangha.org). Complete program information is available on our website.

Want to volunteer or meditate with us? We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. We meditate in the Del Ray section of Alexandria on Tuesday evenings. For more information see our website or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

The Acorn: Our newsletter is printed on paper that is 100% post-consumer waste recycled, process chlorine-free, and manufactured entirely with wind-generated electricity. This issue copyright © 2017, Earth Sangha.

Gold-rated: The Earth Sangha has a gold rating from GuideStar Exchange for commitment to transparency.

One of the best: The Earth Sangha is recognized by the Catalogue for Philanthropy as "one of the best small charities in the Washington, DC, region."



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