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WILDFLOWER RESCUE PAGE 61

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search & rescue

Staying just steps ahead of bulldozers,
an intrepid group of Michigan volunteers seeks
and saves native plants.



Shovels in hand, Cranbrook House & Gardens volunteers Rhonda Thede (left) and Marty Priest head into the woods near Detroit in search of native plants and wildflowers to rescue.



Often considerably smaller than a shovel, wildflowers such as this rue anemone (*Thalictrum thalictroides*) are delicate discoveries and among Michigan's many native species.



ABOVE: Mud and muck are no deterrent to the dedicated Cranbrook volunteers, who gather each spring on a variety of threatened sites in and around Detroit.

1. Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) are a plant sale favorite. **2.** Star-shaped rue anemone is a volunteer favorite. **3.** Rhonda examines a skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) specimen before adding it to the day's plant pile. **4.** Delicate spring beauty (*Claytonia virginica*) plants are white at first but bloom pink when fully open. **5.** Marty is all smiles despite the spring day's miry conditions.

“Watch out! The mud gets up to 3 feet in spots,” Rhonda Thede cautions a team of volunteers as they gather in the parking lot of a Detroit-area golf course. The part-wooded and part-denuded construction site—soon to be part of the golf course’s expansion—is an unlikely spot for treasure hunting, but that’s exactly what’s happening here on this overcast spring day.

With shovels over their shoulders, the small group of women dressed in hats, rubber boots, and warm rainproof parkas head off, dragging colorful plastic sleds. Soon, exclamations such as “Oh, how lovely!” and “What a sweet little grouping!” can be heard, as can calls for reinforcement and strong arms when the knee-deep mud gets the better of the digger. “When you hear a sucking sound, you know you are in trouble,” Rhonda says to a newbie.

About an hour later, sleds piled high with blooming booty—on this day, colorful clumps of rue anemone, pussy-toes, maidenhair fern, Solomon’s seal, golden marsh marigold, even skunk cabbage—are pulled to waiting SUVs and station wagons. “There’s a reason they’re called skunk,” Rhonda says with a laugh.

While possibly odiferous, no native plant is too humble to be worthy of rescue, according to the Native Plant Rescue Program, formed in 1975 as an extension of Cranbrook House & Gardens Auxiliary in Bloomfield Hills, a Detroit suburb. Most of the rescues are sold at the annual spring plant sale in May to help maintain Cranbrook House & Gardens, part of the renowned Cranbrook educational community; others are donated to local community gardens, schools, and nature centers or planted in the Cranbrook gardens for the public to enjoy. Sites are researched throughout the year, although digging is done mostly during a few weeks in spring.

Similar groups exist around the country, but Cranbrook’s is one of the oldest and most successful. In the past decade, the annual plant sale has raised approximately \$350,000, with native plants contributing more than half of that total. “Our goal is not just to save wildflowers but also to educate the public about the value and use of native plantings,” says volunteer Saida Malarney, who, along with Rhonda, is a tireless cochair of the program.

Immediate goals “are to rescue as many plants as possible in our limited window of time—three weeks in early spring—before the sale, mosquitoes, and poison ivy,” Rhonda says. “We try to get as much as we can because we honestly don’t know if it will be here the following year.” Usually the group is working against the weather and the clock, and although permission is granted in advance, some sites are more welcoming than others. Longer-term goals include



Golden-hue marsh marigold (*Caltha palustris*) thrives in marshes, ditches, and wet woodlands.

A woman wearing a red beanie, a dark blue jacket, and dark pants is pulling a purple basket filled with yellow flowers and green leaves through a wooded area. She is holding a rope attached to the basket. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and twigs. In the background, there are trees and a blue tarp.

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educating the public about the importance and attractiveness of native species, educating local developers about the group’s mission, and establishing a native display garden at Cranbrook. The group averages about 35 volunteers, with a core of about 20 regular dedicated diggers. After digs, volunteers return to Cranbrook, where they pot and identify their treasures then add them to the labeled tables waiting for the upcoming plant sale, a highlight of the area’s spring gardening calendar.

“One of our greatest accomplishments is the number of trilliums we have saved,” Saida says—a number she estimates at more than 1,000. Other species are more elusive. “Finding yellow lady’s slipper would be the ultimate prize,” she says, adding that they’ve only been found twice since the program began. “They are the only native orchid that we can successfully transplant. Red trillium are more common, but we are still very excited to find them.”

“Highs are finding new sites filled with interesting species,” Rhonda says. Volunteers are always on the lookout, and the public is encouraged to submit suggestions. “Lows are definitely digging at a beautiful site knowing what will happen later. When we have a site for a couple of years, we often see it declining. Drainage is changed, machinery brings in invasive species, ATVs show up.”

Hanging out with like-minded plant-lovers makes the mud, mosquitoes, sore muscles, and inevitable disappointment worthwhile, Rhonda says. “We all get really excited when we find an unusual plant or a really lovely specimen. And knowing we’re often just one step in front of the bulldozers is always good motivation.” **CG**

For more information, see *Resources* on page 111.

GET GROWING NATIVE

Should you go wild? Native plants thrive on less water, less fertilizer, and fewer pesticides. They also provide food and shelter for species as varied as frogs and hummingbirds. “The decline of the Monarch butterfly and the movement to plant milkweed as a host plant for them is just one example,” she says of the importance of native plantings. Designed to encourage and educate gardeners, groups like Cranbrook’s Native Plant Rescue Program are cropping up around the country as awareness and advocacy grows. To find one in your area, contact a nearby native plant society or Master Gardener program. The Wild Ones (wildones.org), a national group dedicated to native plants and natural landscapes,

has chapters across the country, some with rescue programs. Interested in starting your own wildflower rescue? The Cranbrook House & Gardens Auxiliary has put together “How to Form a Wildflower Rescue Team,” handy instructions designed to help interested groups get growing. Packed with useful tips, it includes site selection (remember: no collecting from national or state-owned land), securing permission to dig, successful transport, proper cleanup, making the most of volunteer time, and more. The 2017 Annual Spring Plant Sale takes place May 16–17. For more information, call the auxiliary office at 248/645-3149 or visit housegardens.cranbrook.edu/support/native-plants.

OPPOSITE: After battling the elements, Marty carts a sled full of marsh marigolds back to waiting cars for transport. **ABOVE:** 6. Trillium—both white (*Trillium grandiflorum*) and red (*Trillium erectum*)—carpet the floor of the Michigan woods in spring 7. An SUV is loaded with the day’s bounty, which is later taken back to a staging area at Cranbrook House & Gardens. 8. Volunteers Gail Lentz, Louis Kurta, Mary Ann McDermott, Saida Malarney, Alice Ward, Rhonda Thede, and Marty Priest are proud of their rescued plants. 9. Marsh marigold is potted and tagged for the spring sale. 10. Red trillium, also known as stinking Benjamin, produces one nodding flower that rises above the leaves and emits an unpleasant odor.