

a voice
for the natural
landscaping
movement



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Celebrating natives
plant and natural
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The Grapevine

By Maryann Whitman

And the times ... they are a-changin'...

Apologies to Bob Dylan, but duh...that is the nature of time.

Where I live is a park of a hundred-and-some acres that encompasses open fields, woods one may get lost in, wondrously inhabited hedgerows, and variously sized marshes, swamps, and plain-old mud holes. Children bussed from local schools, are ushered around "stations" where experienced naturalists help them find bugs, worms, and salamanders. The children are enthralled, and invariably, before the day is done, someone manages to fall into a mud hole, and is followed by the rest of the group under one pretext or another. Controlled mayhem reigns under tolerant eyes of the docents, until it's time to get back on the bus.

When I was a child, falling into mud holes was not quite as attractive, because they weren't all that unusual. In fact we had one at the "bottom" of the school yard. In this grove of a half dozen trees surrounding some cattails, we found bugs and garter snakes under the tutelage of the older children, who, in the spring, also introduced us to the odors of ramps.

The lessons were not as calm as those of the docents in Bear Creek Nature Park, but Mrs. Gaw, our teacher, somehow managed to put her own organized stamp on them when we came in from recess. She told us how snakes moved though they had no feet, and explained that ramps were wild onions that were among the first fresh vegetables to be had in the spring, and that Indians and early settlers were always pleased to add them to their stews.

Somehow we were able to step through the portal created by Mrs. Gaw's stories into the world of Nature that surrounded us – it made sense and we became part of it.

Our rare bus trips took us to far-away places that were foreign to our every-day existence, like the Art Museum and the Parliament buildings. We knew these things existed but they had no real impact on us.

I wonder how the children who are bussed to Bear Creek Nature Park feel about their experience, and where it fits into the greater scheme of their lives.

Sometimes you settle for what you can get

Known as the "sequoia of the East," the American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) was once dominant in forests from Maine to Georgia, a majestic giant that easily grew to 4 feet in diameter, 120 feet high, and lived for centuries. Its nuts were an important source of food for animals and humans – its rot-resistant wood prized by timber and furniture companies.

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Sometime before 1905, a fungal blight was accidentally imported from the Far East. First noticed in the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens in 1904, by 1950 it is estimated that 3.5 billion American chestnut trees – 25 percent of the trees in the Appalachian Mountains, had been wiped out by the fungus.

Until recently, fewer than 10 mature specimens were known to be surviving in their original area of distribution. Earlier this year, an actual grove of American chestnuts was discovered in Georgia. Another 100-or-so mature trees are found growing in planted hedgerows in Wisconsin, Oregon, and in British Columbia, Canada, surviving geographically isolated and out of their native range.

For the last 25 years, researchers have been cross pollinating American chestnuts with naturally blight-resistant chestnuts from China. This has been a tedious task, as young trees do not bear fruit until their sixth year, time enough to succumb to the blight. They now have a tree that is 15/16ths American chestnut, that will grow tall and true, with 1/16 Chinese chestnut resistance. One such tree was planted on the White House lawn in 2005, and is still doing well.

By 2010 it is optimistically predicted that 10,000 blight-resistant, American chestnut hybrids will be ready for trial plantings in forests in the Appalachian Mountains.

Maryann is Editor of the Wild Ones Journal, and comes to the position with an extensive background in environmental matters of all kinds.