

Make a Difference

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ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION: LESSONS FOR LANDOWNERS

If you are a Whidbey Island resident, there is a good chance you live here, at least in part, to enjoy the bounty of natural settings this place provides. The beauty of the island is no secret: our home is known all across the region for its scenic character, bountiful wildlife, and the quality of life all this brings.

Of course, we don't live in an untouched wilderness, but a landscape that has been shaped by human activity. Since the pioneers of the 1850s arrived, many unique ecosystems have been ravaged: some lost forever and some greatly reduced, waiting for their chance to rebound. Now, with the techniques developed over the past 40 years by ecological restorationists, we can begin to recover our losses. The work to provide wildlife with ample habitat can be done with newfound optimism. We aren't condemned to just hold the line by preventing loss of forests and other ecosystems, we could gain ground by recovering them.

So now you, dear neighbor, want to do your part to repair the ecosystems and help wildlife on your property. Maybe it's as simple as providing more pollinator habitat around your garden, or you're replanting a section of forest that was cleared years ago – well, what should you know? As a stewardship specialist at the Whidbey Camano Land Trust, ecological restoration is a love of mine; I revel in it. With my colleagues on the stewardship team at the Land Trust, we are actively restoring over 750 acres of forest, wetland, prairie, and shoreline habitat. We have learned many lessons over the years and would like to share some key concepts and useful tips for the novice restorationist.

The first and most important part of any successful restoration project is gathering information about your property. Before you begin laying out a planting plan and ordering trees and shrubs, take stock of what you have around you. This can be difficult for those of us who are eager to get to work healing the planet, but patience is key! Observation will reveal what the land does and does not want to become. What plant species are already growing nearby? How much sun and moisture do you have? What types of animals are, or could be, using the area? These are all questions we must consider before we can devise a plan. They will get you thinking about goals for your project, and what strategies you might use.

So this brings us to the all-important question: what are your goals for your project? We have to look at what restoration is to answer this one. Restoration can be something of a misnomer in fact, because we simply cannot recreate, exactly, what a piece of land historically was. Rather, we are restoring ecological function back to the landscape. This is important to keep in mind when we go about selecting plants. We have to be thinking about ecological communities – plants, animals, fungi, etc. that associate with one another – when we're putting it all together. If we're picking our favorite tree species from a list, well, that's an arboretum, not a restoration project. And there's nothing wrong with that! But if you are seeking to provide the best wildlife habitat, sequester the most carbon, and grow something more resilient to the effects of climate change, most of the time you want a native ecosystem. This means understanding what these ecosystems look like, and what their components are. There is no substitute for having a clear image in your head of a healthy forest or wetland you are trying to recreate.

So perhaps that sequoia – which many among us want to provide refuge for, given California's prospects in a changing climate – has a place in your landscaping. But will it integrate well into our native forests? It likely won't harm anything. The question is, can our birds, insects, and fungi,

which didn't co-evolve with these trees, make as much use of them as they could, say, a western red cedar? Not likely. Simply put, go native with your plants!

There is something to be said about bringing plants from warmer climates to your restoration project. This is a concept called "assisted migration," meaning, on a rapidly heating planet (re: Earth) it may be necessary for human intervention to help get all the right plant genes in the right geographic locations. The planet is warming faster than the plants themselves can migrate. In the Pacific Northwest, our overall rainfall is expected to increase, but our summers are becoming drier and drier. If you're planting conifers, we want them to still be here in 50, 100, 250 years. In other words, what you plant will not just have to survive in today's climate, but will have to bear the full brunt of climate change. Today, many local nurseries are sourcing their Douglas fir from places like the Willamette Valley in Oregon, where the summers are drier and 10-15 degrees warmer, and the trees are already adapted accordingly. In fact, most of the plant species native to our island have natural ranges that extend into warmer, drier climates all over the Pacific Northwest, and it is increasingly common for restorationists to use genetic stock from southern and eastern Washington and Oregon in their plantings.

Regardless of how drought-tolerant your plants may be, in the end, success all comes down to one thing: maintenance, maintenance, maintenance. Depending on what you're doing, you may have to water plants for the first few summers until things are established. Weeds will compete with your plants. And prepare to do battle with grazing deer and rabbits. The thing to remember is nothing will be more stressful, or doom a project more quickly, than biting off more than you can chew. It is far better to piecemeal your work out over several seasons than have a massive project you cannot properly attend to. This work is for the long haul, and the first five years will be critical to its success. The best way to make a difference is to do what you can, but do it well.

I will leave you with this final thought about "going with the flow," a lesson we all learn sooner or later in restoration and in life. Many times my coworkers and I have been humbled by Mother Nature when, after many hours of thoughtful planning and execution, it became clear her plans differed from ours significantly. This happened recently at a Land Trust property in Central Whidbey. Over the course of several months, we cleared a sizeable area of invasive blackberry, put together a planting plan, ordered native plants, rounded up a crew, and planted away. Several months later we returned to monitor the progress, and what did we find? Beavers had moved in, dammed a stream, and now our plants were being flooded and dying! At first I wanted to pull my hair out, we had put so much work into this! Then I reflected on the true goal of this project. We had set out to remove invasive plant species that reduced wildlife habitat. In its place, we wanted to establish native plants which would provide better habitat. By removing the blackberry, we allowed these beavers to move in and establish a new home – wildlife habitat achieved. Not only that, but by flooding this area the beavers had stopped the blackberry in its tracks, saving us time and money on maintenance. What I initially saw as a problem was, in fact, a gift.

The Whidbey Camano Land Trust is a nonprofit nature conservation organization which actively involves the community in protecting, restoring, and appreciating the important natural habitats and resource lands that support the diversity of life on our islands and in the waters of Puget Sound. For more information, visit www.wclt.org, email info@wclt.org, or call 360.222.3310.

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