

Landowner Learns Not All Forest Fires Should Be Prevented



BACKGROUND:

The Flatt parcel, or “Hollow” as they call it, 3.5 acres located in Lima Township, MI, slightly north of I-94 and east of Chelsea was originally part of a black oak barren prior to American settlement. It currently consists of about an acre of intact oak-hickory upland forest and lower-quality prairie for the remaining two-thirds sloping down eastward.

THE CHALLENGE:

The Flatts bought this parcel in 2011 as the site for their dream house. The parcel was part of a larger piece of former farmland that was planned to become a subdivision of luxury log homes that apparently lost its funding in the most recent recession.

The trouble was, like so many sites in SE Michigan, no one had been caring for the land; so a combination of neglect and land disturbance led to the inevitable migration and establishment of invasive plants. “When we were first poking around, we didn’t notice all of the invasives. We only saw ‘affordable land,’” reported Ray Flatt. “It wasn’t until after the purchase, when I spent more time out here that I noticed all the unwanted crap that was growing here.”

Garlic mustard, dame’s rocket, autumn olive, buckthorn, honeysuckle, barberry, and spotted knapweed all had colonized the Flatt parcel as well as the surrounding lots. The Flatts desired to be responsible stewards and so started pulling garlic mustard and cutting some of the autumn olive, but quickly felt overwhelmed.

By chance, Ray bid on a consultation with Appel Environmental Design offered by the Huron River Watershed Council, and won. Mike Appel toured the property with Ray in November 2011 pointing out the strengths, weaknesses, points of despair, and pockets of hope that existed on the land.

THE SOLUTION:

During the consultation, Ray asked Appel if his company provided prescribed burns. It did and after the consultation the planning began for the following spring. Both parties determined that the wooded section would bring about the best results: the area was intact, not fragmented like the prairie, and wasn't overrun with invasive plants.

The day arrived in late March 2012 and the Appel team went to work. "They explained the entire process from ideal relative humidity, how drip torches work, to paying attention to the wind. Not to mention just how cool fire is," Flatt recalled smiling. "The crew let our family and friends watch the whole operation from start to finish and emphasized our safety."

THE RESULT:

At first Ray and his family were a bit shocked at how "ugly" the landscape appeared, but soon realized that when land is burned, blackened and charred is the result. Most of the trees suffered no damage, but the majority of the vegetation in the woods was gone.

Two weeks later when the Flatts visited their lot they were surprised by the rapid recovery of the land. "It had greened up much faster than I imagined," Ray said. The spring ephemerals showed up on time and bloomed in ignorance of the fire that had gone through just a few weeks earlier.

Now, a year later, Flatt reports, "I've got much more trillium than before, wild geranium, wild columbine, a little bit of anemone, spider-wort, Solomon's seal, and a few others I'm not sure of. There's just so much there now. It's glorious."

He's noticed a stronger presence of native plants and the invasives in the woods are less in number and "more manageable." The burn has created healthier soil, revived a dormant seed bank, and reduced the number of aggressive invasive species.

"I want Mike and his team out here soon to help me with this prairie, because a burn would sure beat pulling spotted knapweed by hand."

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CONTACT INFORMATION:

To learn more about how Appel Environmental Design can help you restore health to your land E-mail us at appel@umich.edu or call 734.998.1759



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