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Great oaks from lovely acorns

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By Lisa Rauschart - Ire Akinsiku is a girl with a mission. Over the past hour on this sunny Saturday morning on the grounds of the Izaak Walton League in Damascus, the 10-year-old has been carefully sorting through the browning leaves and bits of bark strewn across the forest floor.

She has stopped in a stand of chestnut oaks and is scrambling for their acorns — large and brightly colored, packing the promise of a lofty tree to come.

Now she's lugging several pounds of the seeds to a central receiving station.

"It's very interesting to learn about the acorns," says Ire, a self-described "science person" from John T. Baker Middle School in Damascus. "But I never knew it could be so much fun."

She's not alone. It's Seed Collection Day, one of several scheduled for this season by Growing Native, a program of the Potomac Conservancy that partners with state, local and community groups in order to plant and replant native tree species.

The goal is to improve the overall quality of the Potomac watershed, the nearly 15,000-square-mile area of land that drains into the Potomac River. The seeds collected here today will be given to state nurseries, where they will be grown into seedlings that in a year or two will be planted streamside.

"We try to have something scheduled every weekend," says Colleen Langan, Growing Native project director. "We really work hard to get the word out."

More trees, better air

Talk about grassroots efforts. Since 2001, Growing Native has organized the collection of more than 94,000 pounds of seeds: oaks, ash and poplars, among other hardwood species. But seeds, or acorns in this case, are just one part of the picture.

"Once the open spaces are gone, they're gone forever," says Bill Gazdik of Rockville, a member of the Izaak Walton League (IWL) chapter in Damascus, which helped organize the day's collecting. Growing Native seed collection events are often hosted by community groups or local parks.

"I look at a tree and imagine the history that it's seen," he says. "Cut it down, and that's a

part of history lost."

More trees mean cleaner cities, healthier air and better water. As any school-age child knows, trees produce oxygen, while their roots help secure the soil, particularly along streams and rivers.

So the state nurseries in Maryland and Virginia organize streamside planting projects to try to retard runoff, which is causing much of the area's "nonpoint source" pollution, allowing toxins to easily make their way to the Potomac River and on to the Chesapeake Bay.

Seeds of an idea

It all starts with the seeds.

About 30 people joined Ire and her father, Benson Akinsiku, for an hour of seed collecting. Growing Native organizers had focused this day's foraging on oaks and their acorns only, and by the morning's end, Ire and her fellow seed gatherers had bagged nearly 300 pounds of acorns.

"We want to teach them to take care of what we have," says Nancy David of Gaithersburg, an IWL chapter member. Her family effort included husband Ron and children Andrew, 12, and Jillian, 11. Together, the group collected 49 pounds of acorns.

But despite the pressures of competitive collecting — event organizers offered a prize for the heaviest bag — participants were not too busy to discover a few other things.

For example: Chestnut oaks don't produce leaves that look like those of other oaks, and their acorns are larger; White oak acorns are knobby, and are a favorite treat for area deer; Black oaks have a fuzzy underside to their leaves; Pin oaks produce tiny striped acorns.

And an acorn cap, held with the thumbs bent across the top of the cup, makes a pretty cool whistle.

Caring for what's left

The Growing Native event is a natural fit for the Izaak Walton League, one of the nation's oldest conservation associations. The Damascus chapter is especially interested in wildlife and conservation. Members even have begun a tree planting program of their own, shepherding a small stand of American chestnut trees and starting another of a hybrid American-Chinese variety.

"One hundred and fifty years ago these woods looked completely different," says Bethesda's Sandy Burk, who helped to organize the event. She notes that one of the last patches of old-growth forest is located at the site.

"I've got a personal interest in growing trees," says Ms. Burk, a biologist by training who currently works on fish restoration programs with area students. "I want to get young people out there to restore the watershed."

That means taking care of native species like red oaks, black walnuts, or the mighty chestnut oak, with leaves that can be deceptive for first-time gatherers: Their ridged edges, unlike the deeper lobes usually associated with oak trees, make them look a lot more like chestnut leaves. But there's no mistaking the seeds they drop — large, colorful, unmistakable acorns.

"They're really beautiful," says Ms. Langan, holding a handful of many-colored acorns. "It would be a shame to let these go."

From tiny acorns

For Ms. Langan, the pickings are just about as good as gold.

Since Growing Native's inception six years ago, more than 30,000 volunteers have participated in the program, which has resulted in the planting of nearly 6 million seedlings. Last year's efforts yielded more than a million new trees.

The nearly 300 pounds of seeds gathered at the Izaak Walton League site will be taken to the state nursery at Easton. They are grown, roots exposed, before being planted at various locations through the state.

Some organizations participating in collection events will keep back a few bags of seeds and start their own "grow-out" stations, shepherding the new trees throughout the growing process.

In the Greater Washington area, the saplings have ended up at a number of sites, including Poolesville High School and Westbrook Elementary School.

Drought, bugs, blight

Saving native trees is particularly important now, says Ms. Langan, because the species are threatened more than ever before. According to American Forests, a nonprofit conservation organization aimed at protecting trees, America's cities have a deficit of 634 million trees. And areas with little or no tree cover are growing.

The current drought doesn't help. Dry conditions can cause old trees to fall. And Ms. Langan notes that she's seeing fewer healthy acorns on the ground these days.

"Earlier, a lot of trees were aborting seeds that were not good," she says, picking up a dried-out and sickly looking acorn.

That's not to mention trees' natural enemies, like bugs and blight.

The American chestnut tree fell victim to the latter in the early 20th century. Cankers from the introduced fungus *Cryphonectria parasitica* were first reported on chestnuts in 1904. Within a few years, the lofty trees that once lined residential streets in city neighborhoods disappeared. So did their counterparts in the area forests.

In their place came the oaks, which today tower so tall that you'd think they were always

there, according to one young lady lugging her acorn sack behind her.

Paving the forest

But they may not be there as long as you think. Development, particularly sprawl, proves a great challenge for both trees and the environment as a whole. Once an area is cleared, the lack of natural vegetation and additional impervious surface area created by new roads and buildings means greater runoff and flooding problems, says Ms. Langan, who estimates that the Chesapeake Bay area loses about 30 acres of forest a day due to sprawl.

"The tree canopy slows rainfall and the forest floor slows velocity," she says. "Remove vegetation and replace it with rooftops and concrete, and the water runs off faster, adding pollutants and heating up streams at a greater rate. That produces all sorts of problems, not the least of which is the impact on wildlife."

Then there are invasive species, like English ivy and oriental bittersweet, which quickly overwhelm the natural vegetation, choking out trees and inhibiting seedling growth.

"People don't need to clear out everything," Ms. Langan says. "Growing native species actually makes a lot of sense."

Sinkers wanted

Got a few acorns in your back yard? You don't have to wait for a Growing Native event to get with the program. Drop-off boxes are nearer than you think. Many are housed at area schools; there's one at Sidwell Friends on upper Wisconsin Avenue in the District, another at D.C. Greenworks on Sixth Street Northwest, and more all around the area.

No back yard? No worries. You can still collect seeds at one of the many collection sites in the area. D.C. Parks and Recreation, for example, provides a listing of parks where seed collecting is allowed, and more listings are available from the Growing Native Web site.

That means you just have to spend an hour or two in the woods and then take the nuts on down to a place with a drop-off box. Just be mindful that proper collection is key. Seeds should be separated by type and stored in breathable bags — and to aid identification it's helpful to put a spare leaf or two from the tree the seeds came from into the same bag as the seeds.

"If the seeds aren't sorted we can't use them," says Ms. Langan. "The people at the nurseries just end up throwing them out."

If you're worried about how to tell whether the acorns are suitable, given the drier conditions this year, don't be. Ms. Langan has a foolproof method:

"Put them in a bucket of water," she says. "The ones that float are no good. What we want are the sinkers."

And, obviously, you can't just collect any old seed. There's a desired species list available on the Growing Native Web site — www.potomac.org/growingnative/index.html — with tips

on how to tell one seed from another.

"We're always in need of oaks," says Ms. Langan. "They're great for wildlife."

A family event

But whether you are collecting black walnut, bald cypress or yellow poplar, there may be an added boon. Many students can earn hours toward community service credit, an increasingly popular requirement at area schools. Montgomery County, for example, requires 75 hours of community service for high school graduation.

The events are also a natural fit for Scout groups. There's even a Growing Native patch, part of the "Go Nuts for Scouting" program.

Meanwhile, parents have a chance to be outside with their children in a way that's different from those Saturday morning soccer games where everyone is screaming from the sidelines.

"It's just nice to be out in the woods on a Saturday morning," says Mrs. David.

Of course, you don't have to tell all this to Ire. She's already planning to come again, and take a look in her own back yard.

"I was originally just going to drop her off," says Mr. Akinsiku. "But it seemed so interesting, I decided to stay. I think we'll be doing this again."
