

Naturalized Park Projects (March 2013)

By Gary Pedersen, Naturalized Areas Supervisor, City of Saskatoon

The Naturalized Park program saw another year of steady growth and development as we slowly “spread our wings” within the Parks Branch. Aside from the necessary equipment purchases that had to be made after our program’s independence, (Naturalized Areas were formerly a sub-program under Horticultural Maintenance) there is also tremendous expansion coming our way in the near future with respect to the amount of park area that we will actively maintain.

We will be gaining the Moose Jaw Trail (Mark Thompson) Park late this year, and look forward to Hyde Park in 2014. Hyde Park will witness the first extensive planting of native prairie grasses in an urban Saskatoon park and we will be monitoring its progress very closely in this, the year when planting will take place. For anyone interested, Hyde Park is located just to the east of Boychuk Drive in the Rosewood area near Slimmon Road. Moose Jaw Trail Park is a true undisturbed natural area that also preserves the relic wagon trail ruts of the old Moose Jaw—Saskatoon trail that linked the CPR railway main line with Saskatoon. This Park is situated along Rempel Manor in Stonebridge.

Early in the spring, we continued on with our practice of “bio-salvaging” plant material. We removed surplus sandbar willow plants from the riverbank area at Gabriel Dumont Park and made them into cuttings. We then planted these cuttings along the shorelines of several wetlands in South East or Donna Birkmaier Park. The objective of this planting was two-fold; to enhance wildlife habitat along wetland shorelines and to improve the “buffering capacity” of the shoreline vegetation. Buffering capacity in this instance refers to the ability of shoreline vegetation to filter out nutrient run-off and toxic chemicals that ultimately have their source from adjacent lands. In the specific case of Donna Birkmaier Park, there are recreational playing fields adjoining wetlands which witness frequent chemical fertilizing of turf with the likelihood of some nutrient run-off into the ponds. This effort met with considerable plant survival success as willow are relatively easy to propagate via this method and we were very happy with overall results.

A second major effort took place in late summer with a planting blitz of Saskatoon Berry shrubs. Late summer is a very good time to purchase plant material from Garden Centres and we were able to take advantage of some great discounted prices. Over seventy Saskatoon Berry shrubs in one gallon containers found new homes in Lakewood, Heritage, and Donna Birkmaier parks. We are hoping that area songbirds will reap the benefits from this effort.

Similar to last year, we are continuing with our efforts to diversify our grassland areas by seeding native wildflowers. We have not seen any results as yet through our first attempt which involved over seeding into bare spots in grasslands. But patience is always a virtue when dealing with native plants. We are investigating other strategies such as the creation of “island flower beds”. Once wildflower beds are established, the flowers will mature and spread seed through natural dispersal into the adjoining grasslands.

Last year we were hoping to receive certification in the use of prescribed fire, but the field day exercise that was crucial to our training was cancelled. This year, we selected an alternate training route through Parks Canada’s “Grasslands Basic Wildfire Management” course offered in Val Marie. We will be initiating this management tool in a couple of small scale trial areas this year. Our main objective in the use of prescribed fire is essentially as a maintenance strategy to recycle nutrients and eliminate duff build up in our grasslands. But fire can also help increase biodiversity as sowing wildflower seed after a fire event can often yield good results.

This year should see the formal recognition of Naturalized parks as a distinct category within the Parks Branch. The Park Classification Review Committee, on which I have had some input, has met over the last few months and has, thanks to the efforts of our Branch representatives, recognized the need for such a classification. Various civic departments have representation on this committee as there are many players at the table who determine how green space is allocated in new developments. Because Naturalized Parks are a new category for the city, it is now a matter of determining the best method of land assembly for such areas but fortunately, we have the experience of other municipalities to learn from and it is just a matter of time before the specific details are worked out. Then we can finally go on with the business at hand of preserving and enhancing our urban biodiversity while being able to celebrate nature in the city, secure in the knowledge that what we are celebrating will be adequately protected. The next couple of years promise to be very interesting.