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Newsletter December 2006 – January 2007

Autumn Fires Bring Growth and Renewal to Prairies

The month of November proved to be just the kind of weather needed to accomplish the vital burns that prairies must have to thrive.

On November 5, several participants burned the 7-acre Moon Tract near Lake Bloomington for the first time. This budding prairie was planted three years ago. "It was a textbook burn, with good fire breaks and many helpers," Don Schmidt reports.

Later that week, it was the Chinquapin Bluffs Prairie's turn. Located in Woodford County, the 68-acre, bottomland prairie is owned by the Nature Conservancy.

On November 25, before the winds got too high, Weston Prairie received a thorough burn with complete coverage. The 200 x 50-foot strip west of the cemetery that will be seeded also received good coverage. Thanks to Dave and Pearl Jeffries and Wayne Ehyman for helping out the land steward.

Next spring, we plan to burn Merwin Prairie and the warm-season grass pastures at Merwin and Lexington prairies. It's a unique opportunity to help our your organization. Watch future issues of the newsletter and the website (www.parklands.org) for details.



Bob Shaw, R. J. Holiday and Angelo Capparella were Land Steward Tim Lindenbaum's able assistants at Chinquapin Bluff Prairie on November 9.



*"Solar eclipse" at Chinquapin Bluff Prairie
Photos by Tim Lindenbaum*

Late Bloomer Brightens Late Autumn Days

The witch hazel, a small native under story tree, is found along moist streams in partial shade. It often sends up several branches directly from the ground which may reach twenty feet in length. The yellow flowers form in late fall opening with small spider like pedals after the leaves fall. Because of the cool weather they are long lasting and may still be in their prime for a bouquet for Thanksgiving.

The seed takes about a year to mature and on a warm dry day in October the seed capsule explodes and sends a black rice shaped seed about 15 feet. Most birds usually avoid witch hazel during the bombardment but not the cardinal. The cardinal doesn't seem to mind all the missiles flying around. I have watched a cardinal in the witch hazel on several occasions and was never able to confirm if the cardinal tripped the capsule and sent the seed flying so it wouldn't bother him later.

In the wild witch hazels are easy to spot when in bloom and after the leaves have fallen but they are rather rare. I have only seen one and that was along a small stream, a tributary of the Mackinaw river. In the summer without the yellow flowers you could pass by dozens and never notice them.

The number and size of the flowers on the witch hazel varies a great deal as most plants are grown from seed. The planting of five or six hazels on the north side of East Washington Street at Moore Street in Bloomington is typical because one is much better than all the rest. There is a much larger planting at Lincoln Memorial gardens in Springfield. While there is need for several of the better witch hazels to be reproduced for the market, it just hasn't happened yet. There are witch hazels available commercially but they are not the improved variety.

Growing witch hazel from seed is a bit tricky. The procedure to break dormancy so they will come up the first year is so complicated I don't try. I place three untreated seeds in a tree pot and don't expect them to come up until the second year. They need to be transplanted while quite small as large plants are difficult to move.

The Ozark witch hazel is a close relative of the witch hazel but it blooms in early spring. There are several clones available on the market. There are two Asian species of hazel that also bloom in the early spring and a host of hybrids that are spring bloomers.

Over the years there have been several doubtful uses of witch hazel. A witch hazel astringent is available, good for cuts and bruises and anything else that ails you. A forked stick of hazel was supposed to have one fork pointing north and one pointing south. When tried in Australia, it didn't work there either. The same forked stick was used as a water dowser. When held in your hands it is supposed to dip over a likely spot to dig a well. But someone spoiled the whole process when he discovered a wire coat hanger was just as unreliable.

I have noticed that winters were considerably shorter if you have a witch hazel blooming in late fall and the cornelian cherry blooming in very early spring.

An occasional tree tale from John English

Calendar of Events

Seed Cleaning Workday

Saturday, December 9, 9:00 - noon
Bloomington Park Maintenance Building
1813 Springfield Road, Bloomington
Bring work gloves
Leader Tim Lindenbaum
309-531-7065

Invasive Species Control

January 27. Location TBA

NOTE: Dates are subject to change. To receive up-to-date information, ask Tim Lindenbaum to put you on the email contact list or check the website: www.parklands.org.

Tim can be reached at tlindenbaum@dprairieinet.net or 309-531-7065.

Address Service Requested

Ecology Action Center
P. O. Box 3132
Bloomington,
Illinois 61702-3132
(309) 454-3169



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