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Hockanum River Linear Park Committee prepares for spring

BY BARBARA ARMENTANO ReminderNews

As spring arrives, the members of the Hockanum River Linear Park Committee will be out exploring the many varieties of trees, shrubs and flowers on the hiking trails that will bloom very soon. Glenn Cornish, the committee's practicing horticulturalist, said it is best to divide several spring tasks along the trails into three parts.



Glenn Cornish demonstrates trimming a tree along the trails to Brian Pillion and Doug Smith.

Photo by Barbara Armentano.

First, the trail problems of invasive and noxious weeds need to be controlled to protect the hiking public from contact rashes from poison ivy and sting from nettles or burrs sticking to their clothes from giant burdock.

Then, there are Asiatic bittersweet and wild cucumber that harm desirable trees and shrubs by growing over them. The invasive purple loosestrife looks beautiful in masses of color across wide marshes but can choke out many other valuable native plants like cattails that are the principal food for muskrats and other animal species. Unique beetles have been introduced by UConn to control the loosestrife growth, with moderate success.

Next, Cornish will survey the 15 miles of hiking trails along the 7-mile-long Hockanum Nature Preserve and view the many spectacular shrubs and trees in their spring colors.

He said the winterberry's white flowers and the petite yellow spice bushes are special. There is the unique catalpa tree with its cluster of big white flowers and the very tall tulip tree in isolated groups, with spectacular big orange flowers high overhead. Then there are

infrequent wild crabapples and escaped Bradford pears that stand out in bright pink at the right time.

The trails have a great abundance of wild flowers all season long, starting with the earliest spring beauties like trout lilies, violets, marsh marigolds and wild geraniums. Later, spreads of dame's rocket in pink, white or purple, vetch and bird's foot trefoil will adorn every meadow, and still later New England asters and the vivid red berries of winterberry will bloom.

For the past 28 years, committee members have planted trees year round. White pine seedlings with their needles in clusters of five have been planted by the hundreds annually and, more recently , Austrian pine seedlings, with their longer, brighter green needles, with two needles per cluster. The older pines are now 20 to 35 feet tall and look spectacular along the west side of Union Pond. Spruces and fir seedling were planted years ago and now stand tall, especially along the Laurel Marsh Trail near I-384 .

Since the year 2000, 5-foot-tall memorial white or Austrian pine trees have been planted in memory of deceased Hockanum Committee members. Lucy Falk adds daffodil bulbs around most memorial trees each fall in memory of her husband, Wayne.

Finally, Cornish will purchase plantings from the North Central Conservation District plant sale in mid-April at their barn on Route 30 in Vernon. In addition to tree seedlings, berry bushes and wild flower seeds, choices will probably include bundles of Austrian pine seedlings, some winterberry, bayberry, high bush blueberry and high bush cranberry bushes and maybe an assortment of seeds like sunflowers for wildlife habitat and food.

Bryan Island, on the river, has a large open meadow suitable for planting, so most of the spring plantings will be placed there. Access is by a footbridge located behind Kohls.

All the funding for plant purchases comes from a variety of donations in memory of Hockanum friends and families . Donations are welcome for plantings , and checks may be sent to the Customer Service Office, 41 Center St., Manchester, CT 06040, made out to the Town of Manchester, for the Hockanum River Linear Park Committee.