

A field of work

A North Shore preserve gets tender care from devoted stewards



IN THE FIELD
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In spring, carpeted with tiny violets, Hope Goddard Ise-lin Preserve in Upper Brookville has a wild beauty that stands out from its more manicured North Shore neighbors.

But just as golf clubs and arboretums require care and tending, there's an art to the stewardship of natural places like this 42-acre stretch of meadow and woodland. In the 15 years since the land was given to the Nature Conservancy, trees have taken root in much of the former farm fields, shrinking the land available to sustain grassland birds and butterflies.

Natural landscaping

So the North Shore Land Alliance, a local conservation group that maintains the preserve, decided to engage in a little natural landscaping. To retain the meadow, volunteers mow the grass, take down fast-growing patches of sumac and even consign some — though not all — trees to the chipper.

"Grasslands are probably the rarest habitat in the world," Jane Jackson, the group's associate director of stewardship, said on a recent April visit to the preserve. "We thought, 'If we don't do anything, it'll be gone.'"

This time Jackson had a tree warden in tow — Mike Pospisil, on loan from the Village of Upper Brookville. Their task: to decide what additional trees, if any, must go.

They also came to check on the progress of native plants such as mayapples, a low, parasol-shaped ground cover that both hoped would thrive



Mike Pospisil, tree warden of Upper Brookville, and Jane Jackson of the North Shore Land Alliance, check a tree in the Hope Goddard Ise-lin Preserve, where he is helping conservationists maintain the grassland habitat. Some trees are axed to let more sun in.

in the open field.

The two made their way toward the meadow through a pearly morning mist. Towhees sang out from the forest, a mix of stately pines and oaks easily 50 to 60 feet tall. The forest canopy of these second-growth woods traps light at the top, making it a challenge for new seedlings or low, light-loving plants to take hold.

"This is very hard to find in Long Island, a true mature forest," Pospisil said.

Jackson monitors the woods for invasive plants, like the bitterroot vines whose stranglerhold has left scars on some trees near the path. But for the most part the forest takes care of itself, she said.

Maintaining the meadow

The meadow, which has shrunk nearly by half during the conservancy's ownership, is a different matter. Shrubs and trees seem to pop up there overnight.

"We have a lot of cherry trees, which are native, but they spread so quickly," Jackson said.

"We could take a few out of here," Pospisil conceded, looking around. Still, the choices clearly came hard for a man who loves his trees.

A cherry tree in one corner survived the cut — the caterpillar it hosts in spring will provide food for the birds who visit the meadow. They decided to let another tree remain be-

cause its branches, extending out over a healthy swath of mayapples, may protect the plants from too much sun.

Others must go. A clump of storm-damaged birches will get the ax, as will the apparently redundant cherry trees right next to the chosen few.

"I try to keep it diverse," Pospisil said. "The dogwoods are beautiful, too — I never cut down a dogwood."

Soon those dogwoods will bloom pink and white. More warblers are due from the South, en route to their northern breeding grounds. Hawks and great horned owls also favor the meadow, which shelters voles and other tasty rodents.

Jackson said the next step for the preserve may be to create a full-fledged grassland by sowing it with seeds from native plants. In the meantime, Pospisil promised to scatter butterfly weed pods here in the fall.

Leaving the field, the pair fell quiet at the margin where meadow meets wood. Birds sang full throat among the branches, drowning out the traffic from Jericho Turnpike.

"It's like a curtain," Pospisil said. "It's nice to just walk in and find yourself again."

The preserve is open to the public from dawn to dusk daily; no pets are allowed. Visitors must check in first with the conservancy to get the combination for the lock on the gate.