

Tending Natural Areas in Home Owner Association Settings

Natural Resources Fact Sheet for Citizens

By Adam K. Downing*

The “sub-division” of land for residential living is common-place through much of Virginia. While we all need a place to live, our society also depends on the natural resources of Virginia for economic and ecologic health. Unfortunately, subdivision residents and association managers rarely consider the importance of managing on-site natural areas for water quality, wildlife, sound buffering, wind protection, recreation and perhaps even products like firewood, vintage lumber or shitake mushroom production. Land owned by an association or by individuals provides a unique opportunity to practice sustainable natural resource management. It is easy to get started.

- 1) **Know what you have.** Learn what trees, shrubs, grasses, weeds, wildflowers and wildlife are on your property. Study them to learn how they grow. The more you know about individual tree species, for example, the better equipped you are to tend the overall health of natural areas.
- 2) **Have a plan.** Work together with neighbors or related committees to agree on a plan. A plan is a flexible document to serve as a reference and guide. Important plan elements are:
 - a) *Goals and objectives.* What do you want from the property? Are these goals reasonable and achievable?
 - b) *Map.* A hand-drawn sketch, an aerial photo or a tax map can help you get a complete picture of what you have and where activities will be focused.
 - c) *Inventory.* Describe what kind of plants, animals, special features, etc. you have, where they are located and how common they are. A complete inventory is not usually necessary or practical; a representative sample will usually work.
 - d) *Sustainable strategy.* What needs to happen to meet these goals? How will this occur? When and where will the activities happen? Who will do the work?
- 3) Here are a few **stewardship priorities.**
 - a) Identify and control non-native invasive plants.
 - i) Species such as tree-of-heaven, kudzu, Japanese honeysuckle, garlic mustard, mile-a-minute, autumn olive, etc. need to be identified and controlled.



*Extension Agent, Forestry & Natural Resources - Northern District

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- ii) Invasive plants often require chemical control for lasting results. Call your local Extension Office for recommended products & methods.
- b) Protect special/unique features.
 - i) Natural springs, water ways, rock outcrops, large remnant trees, unique plants, etc. should be identified and protected.
 - ii) If trail, road or building construction or other disturbance is in the plans, take measures to protect ecologically important areas.
 - c) Take care of the soil, it's the foundation.
 - i) If there is any bare soil, re-establish vegetative cover as quickly as possible with a native seed mixture beneficial to wildlife.
 - ii) If water is on the property, make sure soil does not move toward or into the water. Sedimentation (soil in water) leads to impaired aquatic ecosystems. This is common near impervious surfaces like roads, driveways and parking lots where water runs-off faster and more concentrated.
 - d) Improve diversity & productivity.
 - i) Forests naturally thin themselves. People can guide that process by giving certain desirable species more room to grow by releasing them from competition to improve the vigor, nut production or fall color viewing.
 - ii) This can be accomplished mechanically or chemically and is a great way to get firewood at the same time!
 - iii) A system called "crop-tree management" has been developed by the U.S. Forest Service with small acreage owners in mind. Crop trees are selected for their value(s) for wildlife, aesthetic appeal, potential timber value, waterway protection, etc.
 - e) Expand natural areas.
 - i) Large yards and expansive fields are expensive to maintain. Additionally, chemicals to control weeds and improve grass growth can easily move off site and into nearby water-ways causing long-term water quality problems.
 - ii) Consider letting some areas revert back to forest through natural succession or by planting native trees and shrubs. Consider converting other areas from non-native grasses like fescue to native warm season grasses for wildlife and visual interest.
- 4) **Safety.** Working in natural areas to build a trail, cut firewood or control invasive plants is great way to exercise and bond with others. It can also be very dangerous. Chainsaws, tree parts, poisonous plants and biting insects are a few common perils of working in the woods. Take time to learn basic safety practices concerning your situation.

For more information about managing small acreage natural areas, order "The Woods In Your Backyard: Learning To Create and Enhance Natural Areas Around Your Home." This new manual is designed to help individuals create and enhance natural areas. Go to www.nraes.org or <http://www.naturalresources.umd.edu/Backyard.cfm> or call (607) 255-7654 for more information.