Weeders Find Hidden Treasurers in Widmyer Wetlands

On September 16, 10 members of the Warm Springs Watershed Association (WSWA) met to weed the path through the Widmyer wetlands. Weeding the wetlands is part of the maintenance agreement between WSWA, the Eastern Panhandle Conservation District, which reestablished the wetlands in 2009, and the Morgan County Board of Education, on whose land the wetlands were built. While wetlands normally require little or no maintenance, in this case it's important to keep the path open so that the area is accessible. Several high school science classes use the wetlands as an outdoor laboratory and members of the community can be seen walking through the wetlands on a regular basis.

After filling 31 large bags with weeds from the path, workers were rewarded with an informal wildflower tour throughout area. Several commonly found wildflowers such as boneset, goldenrod, ironweed and Joe Pye weed abound in the wetlands. However, under the guidance of Norman Dean, participants found several less commonly found wildflowers, including turtlehead. Now a fairly rare find, turtlehead is a perennial plant that could once be found throughout most of the eastern half of the United States. Turtlehead usually grows in damp, lightly shaded areas. Native Americans made a tonic from the turtlehead flower to help with digestive problems and a salve from the leaves to relieve itching and inflammation.

When Dean pointed out a gentian plant, another fairly rare find, Rebecca MacLeod noticed that the blue beauty was surrounded by rattlesnake master. Rattlesnake master is found generally in wet or dry prairies and open woods in the southeast US, north to Virginia, and throughout the Midwest to Minnesota, Kansas and Texas. Legend has it that many indigenous peoples in this country used a tea made from rattlesnake master to provide immunity from rattlesnake bites. Scientific studies dispute the effectiveness of this use of rattlesnake master. However, this plant does serve as a host for the Swallowtail butterfly larvae and provides nectar for many pollinators.

In addition to being a home for some beautiful wildflowers, the wetlands perform many other tasks that benefit the environment. Wetland areas collect, filter and clean stormwater - in other words, wetlands act like kidneys for our ecosystems! The soils in a wetlands area act like a sponge, soaking up and holding heavy rain before it reaches Warm Springs Run, thus reducing the severity of flooding. Plants found in the wetlands help to control erosion of Warm Springs Run, which also reduces the severity of flooding downstream. Wetlands provide food, water and shelter for a wide variety and number of wildlife and plants, some of which cannot live anywhere else. The ponds in the Widmyer wetlands maintain water during dry periods, which further enhances their value as habitat for plants and animals living there.

Kate Lehman

304-279-0818

Volunteers from the Warm Springs Watershed Association took care of weeding the Widmyer Wetlands.

Gentian surrounded by rattlesnake master.

Turtlehead