



Friends of the Woods

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By Sue Hagan

With removing invasive plants, there are successes and set-backs, but the steady work by the Park District “Friends of the Woods” volunteer group has made a true impact along park trails and streams. Consider this: Before a crew started tackling garlic mustard in Wolf Run Park (particularly in the Knox Woods Nature Preserve), the plants blanketed the banks rising from the creek. In some areas, that was the only species growing over large areas and the dominant plant seen by visitors. Four years later, it is not eradicated, but the vistas are more open, and native plants — including spring ephemerals — have moved back in. Prior to removal, not only was the garlic mustard smothering native plants but it also was emitting chemicals into the soil that many of the spring ephemerals cannot tolerate.



Now, springtime hikers are seeing mayapple, Dutchman's breeches, jack in the pulpit, hepatica, bloodroot and other gorgeous native plants! The garlic mustard battle never ends. In fact, this year was a banner year for the plant in Knox Woods, and that's not a good thing. We had an unprecedented incursion, which was daunting and discouraging. Luckily, this plant is easy to pull. So even though there were tons of it, we were able to virtually clear it from the southern loop of Knox Woods. We also removed it from much of the periphery of that area, and from the trail and stream edges to try to minimize its spread. It was a huge effort, with bags and bags — each containing hundreds and plants laden with flowers primed to go to seed. We literally prevented millions of seeds from getting the chance to drop to the soil and become new plants. Whew.

One really great note: Toward the end of the season, we also discovered a very healthy population of garlic mustard aphids. It is too early to tell if, or what, impact this insect will have on the plants, but it seems to be an encouraging sign that nature may once again be working to re-establish a healthy balance in our ecosystems. Encouraging as it is, this discovery doesn't yet eliminate the need to continue to remove the garlic mustard. After garlic mustard season ended, we tackled a variety of plants in various parks: teasel and Chinese bush clover in Marshall Meadow (Wolf Run); multiflora rose in Honey Run Highlands; and Japanese knotweed at the canoe launch on Lower Gambier Road.

We had cut away a lot of this bamboo-like knotweed in 2022 and it was wonderful to see new plant growth in the cleared areas — especially the large amount of jewelweed!

As in past years, all this work has been done by a small group of people (with occasional help from seasonal employees and volunteer groups). We can ALWAYS use the help! We'll start again next spring; please watch for a mention via the park newsletter and Facebook page, and consider joining us — even if it's just once to try it out. We enjoy the fresh air, exercise and camaraderie, and love that our efforts are helping nature!

