

Volunteers help take care of the Earth by pulling garlic mustard

Monday, April 21, 2008

BY JENNIFER WEZENSKY

Special to Commercial-Express

Several local nature conservancies are participating in a statewide contest to pull the most garlic mustard from natural preserves -- trying to rid the area of a pesky plant that deters the growth of native plants.

Nate Fuller, conservation and stewardship director of the Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy in Kalamazoo, said that the Michigan Stewardship Network has orchestrated a friendly competition challenging groups across the state to each pull 20,000 pounds of garlic mustard. Kalamazoo is part of the Southwest Corner Cluster, one of five clusters in the state that are competing for "bragging rights," he said. Participating groups in the area include the Audubon Society of Kalamazoo, Kalamazoo Nature Center, the Department of Natural Resources, Sarett Preserve, Fort Custer Training Center, Kalamazoo Wild Ones and Western Michigan University, among others.

"The contest is largely to raise awareness of invasive-species control of natural areas," Fuller said. "We welcome everybody to take part." The contest is under way and will run through the end of May. The winner gets an honorary "Golden Hotdog Award," a tongue-in-cheek recognition, Fuller said. An Earth Day event was planned at Kleinstuck Preserve on April 19. Participants pulled garlic mustard, plant shrubs and small trees, and cleared out invasive shrubs, Fuller said. "The invasive species are overrunning that nature preserve," he said. "The quality has really declined."

Garlic mustard is a plant found predominantly in the Midwest and on the east coast. Introduced from Europe, it is considered a wild edible. Fuller said that the Kalamazoo Nature Center has a cookbook using the plant. Left to grow in the wild, it overwhelms natural vegetation and can wipe out food sources, he said. The plant is a prolific seed-bearer with flowering stalks that can reach 4 feet and rob sunlight, water and nutrients from native woodland plants.

"As it grows and spreads, you get a decreased diversity of plants and animals," he said. "It is really detrimental." It is a bi-annual plant, meaning it has a two-year lifespan. In its first year, it is a small clump of green leaves. The second year, it shoots up a stalk with scalloped, triangular leaves and white, four-petal flowers with banana-shaped seed pods. It is typically about knee-high in height. It spreads seeds in June and July.

The best way to eradicate it is to pull it, put it in black plastic bags and let it rot in the sun, he said. It also can be cut, but the cut stalks need to be removed or they will re-root and seed, Fuller said. Elaine Leppard, vice president of the Audubon Society of Kalamazoo, said that the society is concerned about preserving its 40-acre Mildred Harris Sanctuary at Eighth Avenue and F Avenue in Kalamazoo.

"We're interested because garlic mustard is everywhere on this beautiful piece of property," she said. The Audubon Society is planning workdays at 6 p.m. today and 9 a.m. April 28 at the Mildred Harris Sanctuary. "We'll work on the garlic mustard," she said. "In the spring, we're concerned about that we're getting it before it seeds and spreads. We want to keep it at bay." Anyone interested in joining in the workdays should wear long pants, sturdy shoes, work gloves and bring black garbage bags if possible, she said. For more information on participating in the Audubon Society workdays, call Leppard at (269) 664-4432 or send e-mail to leppardja@yahoo.com.

Paul MacNellis, director of landscape service for Western Michigan University, said that WMU is home to two preserves that are under duress because of garlic mustard. The 274-acre Asylum Lake Preserve, near U.S. 131 and Stadium Drive, and the 48-acre Kleinstuck Preserve, behind the YMCA on Maple Street, are the focus of volunteer efforts to rid them of the "devil of a plant," MacNellis said.

The Michigan State Youth Convention asked for a community project to undertake while holding its annual meeting at WMU. It's expected that about 400 students will be out pulling garlic mustard plants on May 17. MacNellis estimates that volunteers pull out an average of 1,000 pounds of garlic mustard every year. Other mustard-pulling events are scheduled for April 27 and 30 at Kleinstuck Preserve. Visit www.stewardsofkleinstuck.org to learn more about the scheduled events at Kleinstuck. Dave Wendling is president of Kalamazoo area Wild Ones, a national group that promotes landscaping with native plants. Because garlic mustard is an invasive plant, the group is concerned about its ecological effect on natural preserves. "It's a Euro-Asian species brought over here for gardening, and it has kind of escaped into our areas," he said. The Wild Ones may be doing workdays to control garlic mustard in areas along Arcadia Creek. "We're trying to do some stream-bank restoration along those creeks, and getting rid of garlic mustard is part of it," he said. Other garlic mustard events are planned for May 10 at the Chipman Preserve on East Main Street in Comstock and April 26 at Kesling Preserve in Berrien County.

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