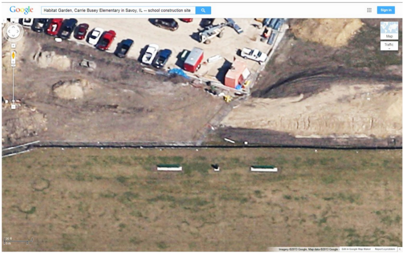
School Habitat Garden in Illinois Prairie Country

BY TONY MCGUIGAN

10 COMMENTS

Building a Habitat Garden at Carrie Busey Elementary School — 4th graders carry corrugated drain pipe to be installed under a dead tree wood slab to create habitat for wildlife.
Photo copyright Rick Danzl of the News-Gazette.

Last week was a banner week for me. I was invited out to Illinois to give a presentation to the Champaign County Audubon Society. The program, "Habitat It And They Will Come", was held at the Anita Purves Nature Center in Urbana. Jim Nardi, Research Scientist of Entomology at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana and author of Life in the Soil, was responsible for my coming out to speak to the Audubon Society chapter. There was also icing on the cake.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Habitat Garden, Carrie Busey Elementary in Savoy, IL -- school construction site
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Construction of Carrie Busey Elementary School in Savoy, Illinois. 2012. The Habitat Garden site (installed November 2013) is in front of the parking lot, just left of the northeast corner (closest to foreground). The swamp white oak tree, planted between the parking lot's corner and the playing field, was chosen because it will tolerate the impacted soil of the recent construction.

As part of my program with CCAS, a local school got its Habitat Garden started. Carrie Busey Elementary School in Savoy, Illinois, a school built just last year, granted me permission to install a Habitat Garden on school grounds. The site was a grassy/mulched path area in front of the school's north parking lot. My original choice was a small triangle of drainage ditch and high weed lot next to the mulched path site — we native habitat gardeners love ditches! However, the mulched path area was chosen to create an "all inclusive" site, that is, to make the area more easily accessible to physically challenged students, some of which might be using wheelchairs. I was happy to rethink the garden's location and move it to the more accessible site. For one, all students would get to experience the landscaping and its wildlife, the garden will be reason to get outdoors, and it will be a break from the classroom. Secondly, having the garden all-inclusive might help with future grants or funding — and that funding will help the school administration develop the garden.

Co-creator of the Habitat Garden at CBE is 4th grade teacher, Elizabeth Slifer. How lucky I am to get to work with this devoted teacher, who just the prior week was awarded the Outstanding Teacher of Science Award from the Illinois Science Teacher Association. Not only did I not know what native plants belonged in the new garden, this would be my first trip to prairie country.   What fun! Off to the web I went. Before I got to Savoy, I was able to arrange for the following:

–Native forb plants (herbaceous flowering plants that are not grasses, sedges, or rushes) donated from the Pollinatarium of the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Thank you, Lesley Deem.

–Locally native wildflower seeds, complete with collection data, from Jim Nardi.

–Native wildflower, oats and rye seed from Prairie Moon Nursery

–4 cubic yards of wood chip mulch donated by the City of Urbana Thank you, Fred Slifer.

–12 bags of fallen leaves from the Elizabeth's compost — a treasure!

–Native Shrubs from Possibility Place Nursery

–Salvaged tree trunks and dead wood slabs from Rice Tree Service in Fisher, IL

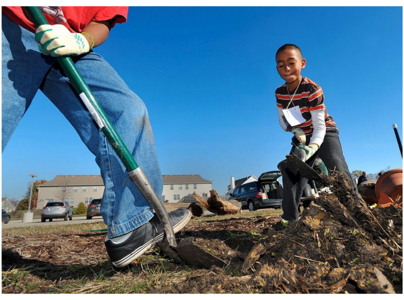
–Swamp white oak tree (3″ trunk) from Moore Trees

–Landscape boulders from Prairieview Landscaping

–Volunteers from the community — it takes a village!

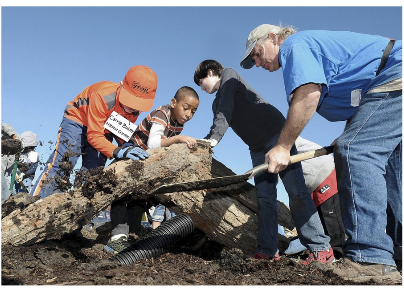
Students of Elizabeth Slifer's 4th grade class, volunteers, and Tony McGuigan (Don't fall in the hole!) find work to do installing Carrie Busey Elementary School's Habitat Garden.
Photo copyright Rick Danzl of the News-Gazette.

Work crew: The students of Elizabeth Slifer's 4th grade class, Elizabeth, parent volunteers, CCAS members Lesley Deem and Jim Nardi, and myself. A great big thanks also to the Grounds Dept. at the school, principal Jeff Scott, and the School Office staff that helped coordinate the project.



Students dig in and cover up a tree trunk section to create wildlife habitat. The dead wood will absorb moisture, attract wood-eating and -boring insects, and will provide shelter for critters microscopic, small, and bigger. Note the wood hulks in the background waiting for installation. The terra cotta flowerpots, whole and broken, far right, will be buried under a pile of rocks covered by landscape boulders — cavities and shelter for critters underground.
Photo copyright Rick Danzl of the News-Gazette.

Most of the habitat installations for the project are subterranean cavities.



Tony McGuigan works with students to create Carrie Busey's Habitat Garden. First a wide, deep hole was dug to fill the space with a corrugated drainpipe section, collected leaves, and wood chip mulch. Then, the thinner leg of this tree section was dug into the ground so that the thicker section (right side) held down the pipe shelter. 4 Elements of Habitat: Water = moisture held by the leaves/mulch/wood. Food = leaves/mulch/wood and the fungi and critters attracted to installation. Shelter = in the leaves/mulch/wood, the surrounding soil, and the drainpipe. Place to Raise Young = same as in Shelter.   Habitat!
Photo copyright Rick Danzl of the News-Gazette.

Students enjoyed the project and were excited about being a part of the Habitat Garden's first day.

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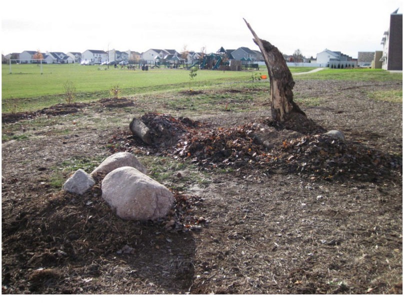
Some of their comments can bee seen at a local newspaper's coverage of the day.

Just me, the soil, and this shovel. A student prepares to dig in a forb plant at Carrie Busey Elementary School's Habitat Garden. The swamp white oak tree in the background is one of the Habitat Garden's main features — it will attract many animals to the site.
Photo copyright Rick Danzl of the News-Gazette.

I would have preferred the children not wear garden gloves, but overall, they had a very tangible experience working with the soil and other habitat providing materials. We had fun with all 12 bags of leaves from Mrs. Slifer's garden!



The After. The students have created a wildlife Habitat Garden at their school, Carrie Busey Elementary School in Savoy, Illinois. Features include underground cavities, logs with holes, a dead tree wood spire, planting seeds (wildflower, oats, and rye), shrubs (American elderberry, chokeberry, and shrubby St. John's wort), 2 oak trees (swamp white oak and shingle oak), and native forbs.

Now that was a busy few days in Illinois. Thank you, students of Carrie Busey Elementary School. And, good luck with your Habitat Garden. Oh wow, spring is coming!

Enjoy your native plant and wildlife gardens. Habitat It!

Tony

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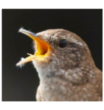

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About Tony McGuigan

Tony McGuigan is the author of *Habitat It And They Will Come: The Why, Who, and Fun-How of Creating Animal Habitats in Your Yard*. Tony brings his many diverse skills and passions to Spore Lore's products and services. His experience as a registered nurse and background in early childhood development, accounting, building, plumbing, sustainable landscaping and gardening—along with being a papa, avid outdoorsman, and enthusiastic student of life—infuses his work as a writer, photographer, editor, and publisher with a uniquely creative perspective, courageous out-of-the box thinking, and immense humor. Related to gardening and ecological landscape design, Tony holds a Sustainable Landscape Professional Certificate from Sonoma State University and a Permaculture Design Certificate from Regenerative Design Institute. Although grounded in cutting-edge research and literature of the field, Tony is pragmatic, not a purist, is unconventional in his landscaping approach yet has an eye for the aesthetic, is a master of reuse and recycling, and is a keen observer of nature and nurturer of relationships—animal, plant and human. Follow Tony on Facebook and also on Twitter

COMMENTS

Marilyn says
November 14, 2013 at 5:35 pm

This is great! I recently read about an "outdoor classroom" for writing that had been created at a school in my area. The article said that there was some evidence to support the idea that people write better outdoors than they do at a computer desk. Let's hope that many such benefits and uses will be found for the habitat garden you and the students created. Bravo!

Reply

Tony McGuigan says
November 14, 2013 at 5:50 pm

Marilyn,
Yes, outdoor writing sounds great. I am happy for the children of the school (Carrie Busey Elementary) because maybe there will be more cause for them to "learn" outside the classroom. Play outdoors!

Thank you for your comment, bravo to you, too.
Tony

Tony McGuigan recently posted..Today's Diversion — A Harlequin Bug on Impatiens Stalk

Reply

Gail Jonas says
November 16, 2013 at 10:15 am

Tony, I've saved the linked website and signed up to receive future articles via e-mail. Thanks so much for all the energy you are putting into lightening the impact of human beings on this precious earth. I was glad to learn that you haven't moved from Sonoma County! Fondly, Gail

Reply

Tony McGuigan says
November 16, 2013 at 10:57 am

Gail,
Thank you for your comments. Sonoma County it is, for life, for me. I am grateful for my neighbors' pro-active, progressive, compassionate stewardship of local and global issues. I so enjoyed meeting like-minded people while in Illinois. Keep the faith!
Tony

Tony McGuigan recently posted..Today's Diversion — A Harlequin Bug on Impatiens Stalk

Reply

Benjamin Vogt says
November 17, 2013 at 11:37 am

Nothing pithy to say, just this: AWESOME!

Benjamin Vogt recently posted..To Butterfly Bush or to Not Butterfly Bush (Or to Native or Not to Native)

Reply

Tony McGuigan says
November 17, 2013 at 3:12 pm

Benjamin,
Glad you enjoyed the post. Thanx for the feedback.
Tony

Tony McGuigan recently posted..Today's Diversion — A Harlequin Bug on Impatiens Stalk

Reply

Heather Holm says
November 20, 2013 at 10:21 am

Tony what a great opportunity, love the details about how you incorporated the habitat elements. I have some terracotta pots I'm going to incorporate in my yard. Thanks
Heather

Heather Holm recently posted..Beneficial Insects – Predators

Reply

Tony McGuigan says
November 20, 2013 at 12:45 pm

Heather,
Nice to hear from you. Terra cotta is one of my favorite habitat-building materials. I like to think of it as a bio-friendly long-lasting water wick that critters, especially amphibians, will want to snuggle up against. My favorite source: a roofing supply company that lets me pick through the discard pile "along the back fence".

I enjoyed your post "Top Five Wetland Edge Plants For Pollinators" (http://nativeplantwildlifegarden.com/top-five-wetland-edge-plants-for-pollinators/), especially the paired pics of the plant/pollinator and its close-up.

There are no broken flowerpots, only more habitat building supplies!
Tony

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