

October 23, 2003

Dear Brenton Arboretum Friends:

It is now October. The Arboretum has completed its seventh growing season. We are now far enough down the path to get a feel for what thrives on our site and what has trouble under our relatively harsh conditions. Thank heaven most everything is growing well, but we do struggle with a few species. They are our sweetgums (I love that tree), the pawpaws (finally taking hold I believe) and the dawn redwood, which have died in winter but should grow here. This is pretty good with well over our hundred species.

Planting and Watering: This spring we planted about 200 trees and shrubs. With the exception of pignut hickory, river birch, several new species of flowering crabapple and downy viburnum, most all were replacements or addition to existing collections. We also planted marsh milkweed, silky and red-osier dogwood, cordgrass and 'Technyi' American arborvitae on the east side of the outlet structure for Lake Homestead.

Until August, rain was plentiful for young trees. In August we started watering in accordance with our plan of giving each new plant a gallon of water a week for each foot of height unless it rained an inch that week. We try to do this for two growing seasons. This is our guideline.

Tree Ordering: We are now working hard at securing plant material for next spring planting season. This is becoming more daunting, for the species we are after now are increasingly hard to find through normal wholesale sources. Several of these are pumpkin ash, Canadian yew and eight hawthorn species.

Research: As reported in the last newsletter, five each of twelve conifer species were planted last spring in the research project. These are all conifers not normally found in our area but, with testing, might work well. Of the sixty plants in the project so far, about 25% died soon after planting and will or have been replanted. Our aim is to see how these trees do over ten years and we do not count death loss soon after planting as important to the project. When you are at the Arboretum, take a look these trees. They are to be found northeast of the main building.

Caution. For protection against deer, they do have an electric fence around them, so if you want a close up look, ask Andy Schmitz to let you in.

Education: This spring, summer and fall we had approximately 484 students in 29 classes from four schools and several home study groups attending our Knee-High Naturalist Program (grades K-2). All this is very well managed by Anne Riordan. There was quite a jump in totals from the year before. I am very pleased (so are the schoolteachers) with the quality of our classes. We will continue this program in 2004 and hope to increase class numbers and the number of schools participating.

We will soon complete a highly successful series of seventeen adult field walks and classes. Amanda Benbow does an excellent job coordinating this. Attendance was good in all except the Leaf Identification Walk. Why this was so I do not know. We will try it again with some changes next year and also introduce a butterfly study walk. With the extensive native grass areas, the legumes and forbes, along with our water areas, we have a profusion of butterflies. Come see! We might also introduce a "Trees of Merit" program specifically for homeowners.

One of the most interesting classes was the Wetland Ecology Walk on July 12. We are starting to get a host of newly planted species popping up around and in our wetlands, which is very exciting for us. Some of the more common are: mud plantain, common arrowhead, sneeze-weed, swamp milkweed, and cardinal flower.

Volunteers: More and more people find us and help us one way or another. I wish to recognize those who volunteer time here. They are Dave and Corrine Williams, Wally Spitt, Dick Miller, Eileen Robb, Bob German, Michael Thompson, Eugene and Eloise Armstrong, Laura Myers, Peggy Reed, Jayne Venard, Bill Scott, Mike and Denise Christman.

Contributions: Also, I wish to gratefully acknowledge those who have made contributions to us over the past year and a half. Warren Lammert, Arnold Levine, Elizabeth Seaton, Balbir and Treva Mathur, James and Jean Palmer, Marietta Brandt, John and Ellen Hunter, Charles Funk, Julie Brenton, Warren Moen, Ann Wallace Fleming, Evening Star Federated Garden Club, Walter and Maridel Jackson, Kenneth Brenton, Rhinehart Farms, Inc., Adel Junior Farmers 4-H Club, Leah Trent, Woodward Brenton and Carolyn O'Brien.

It is not only their cash which helps, it is their endorsement of what we are trying to do. I am deeply indebted.

Prairie: Our last 23 acres came out of the ten-year Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), where it was planted to brome and alfalfa. We can now plant it as we wish. This is the larger question: How much of our 123 acre Arboretum do we want in prairie grasses? Should some be left in hay ground (brome and alfalfa)? As yet we have planted no blue grass, but would it be the best ground cover for some areas? What is the look and feel we are after? These questions are interrelated. I would like to hear from you. Up to now we have planted prairie, tree and shrub groupings, woven around native plants along our waterways and around our ponds. Should there be exceptions to the very natural look and feel? Let me know what you think.

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This year for the first time we did not mow about half of our short grass prairie, which is made up of buffalo and blue grama grass. This gives a very natural look but makes walking off the paths a bit less inviting for those who wish to walk on very short turf all over. Should we keep our buffalo grass areas mowed? Do you have an opinion? I am very interested in your thoughts.

Deer: Deer continue to be a problem here, and it is growing. They sculpt our trees in spring and summer even though we ring them with wire; and then they rub them in the fall and winter. I have thought of putting up a deer fence around the Arboretum but it is very expensive and might change our appearance. I am trying to get more deer licenses for “harvesting” but I hate to kill them. A dilemma. Any ideas?

Visitors: Our sign-in register suggests that more people are visiting the Arboretum, and from farther afield, but the numbers are still modest. In addition, of course, we have young and old who come for classes. Our aim at the Arboretum is to provide an experience found nowhere else: a blend of walking paths and roads through a natural, appealing landscape of trees, shrubs, grasses, flowering plants and water, all wound together into a whole.

We now have five walking paths fully open. Two have descriptive educational plaques for each species. The Leaf Walk has its own brochure with a key for self identification.

It has been our goal to offer strong learning experiences along our paths. We wish to encourage visitors to get out of their cars and walk one of these short loop trails.

And one final comment before closing. We recently approved a tree dedication policy which allows a person to honor the life of another by dedicating a tree. The first to be so honored is my brother Bill Brenton, who died in January 2003. It was dedicated by Charles Rhinehart of Dallas Center, whose family has been close to the Brenton family for one hundred years.

There you have the newsletter. The next one will be in the spring. As I am beginning to realize, this Arboretum is an odyssey which continually unfolds. It is very thrilling and rewarding for all of us associated with it. I hope that as you think about this marvelous place, you think of it as yours - for it is.

Sincerely,

J.C. (Buz) Brenton, Chairman
The Brenton Arboretum

P.S. For communication, the Arboretum E-mail address is brentonarboratum@aol.com.