



Conservation sensations

SUSAN PRIOR IS A LANDOWNER PURSUING HER DREAM: TO CREATE A THERAPEUTIC GARDEN IN HONOUR OF HER BELOVED AUNT. SHE'S BECOME A WETLAND CONSERVATION AMBASSADOR IN THE PROCESS.

By Mitch Kruse

Running along both sides of the meandering Carp River, Prior's property has a natural riverside appeal and convenient location near downtown Ottawa, Ont. But she knows that her property has the potential to be more. And she has someone to inspire her.

"This story begins with an Austrian lady who spent part of World War II as an enemy alien. Her name was Herma Kirchmayer. She was adopted by my family and became my auntie," says Prior. "When she was in good health, my aunt visited, gardened and had my kids trailing after her eating what she grew." Unfortunately, a series of tragedies changed everything.

"My aunt went blind and lost a leg in a bus accident. I was her guardian in her later years. In honour of her, I want to create a therapeutic sensory garden for the handicapped and the blind," says Prior.

With the memory of how much her aunt loved to garden and wander outside in peace and quiet, Prior set out to make her vision a reality. She visited handicap facilities, communities for the blind and treatment centres for children with severe autism to learn how to make her project inclusive to as many people as possible.

Her dream included raised beds and accessible pathways would allow people to experience the garden using all senses. Masses of a single plant, such as lavender or sunflower, would provide blocks of colour to those with poor vision. Visitors could smell and taste an assortment of herbs. Trees, like tamarack, would whisper in the wind as frogs croaked from small ponds. A variety of textured plants—from fuzzy and prickly to smooth and waxy—would provide a hands-on experience.

Prior also began to think of how she could conserve her land.

In the early 1900s, several sections of the Carp River were straightened when river bends were filled in, including the section on Prior's property. This isolated the natural river meanders. Restoring her portion of river property to its natural state was the logical first step. Prior attended lectures about wetland conservation, including one delivered by Jamie Fortune, Ducks Unlimited Canada's (DUC) chief operating officer.

“He told everybody that it’s too bad kids today can’t enjoy the outdoors like when he was young. He said he always bicycled to a fishing spot on an old bridge on the Carp River. I realized he was describing my back yard,” says Prior.

Fortune introduced Prior to Mark Gloutney, DUC’s director of regional operations, eastern region. Prior had already met with several groups interested in restoring the river, including the Mississippi Valley Conservation Authority, the Friends of Carp River, and Nicholas Stow, environmental planner with the City of Ottawa.

“I had my fingers in about eight pies, none of which I was eating yet,” says Prior. “When Mark said he could get this going, everyone just came together.”

During their initial meeting, Prior and Gloutney discussed the potential to include wetlands in her concept for the gardens. The sounds provided by diverse wetland wildlife, like frogs and songbirds, was an exciting addition to the sensory experience.

Gloutney and his team prepared a project plan and worked with a variety of partners to assemble the funding, with the lead funding coming from the City of Ottawa and the Government of Canada’s National Wetland Conservation Fund (NWCFF) administered by Environment Canada. The plan took into account housing developments, spring flooding and with special consideration of the endangered Blanding’s turtles in the area. They had an expert design a turtle nesting area, something new for a DUC project.

The NWCFF funds needed to be invested by March 31, 2015. This required a lot of effort on the part of the City of Ottawa to secure their contribution. With some encouragement from Nicholas Stow, the City passed the motion in December 2014 to split project costs with DUC.

“When DUC approached us with the project proposal, we had to act quickly,” says Coun. Eli El-Chantiry, who represents Prior’s ward. “We had just passed the budget when this came along. I had to pass a walk-on motion to make it possible.”

During the winter, contractors restored four wetlands where traces of the river’s natural curves remained. The cold winter was ideal for restoration work, but the harsh weather tested the mettle of Thomas Cavanagh Construction Limited staff. Over summer, the contractors flattened out paths along the ponds and riverbank.

Prior and her grandchildren are thrilled with what they’ve seen so far.

“We’ve already had a pair of mergansers nesting,” says Prior. “In this area there are also muskrats, beaver and river otters. Everyone around here considers the Carp River a ditch, but it’s a really vibrant ditch! It’s already opening up.”

Prior can’t wait to welcome visitors to the new “Oakleigh Wetlands Project.” Several local teachers have enquired about bringing their classes there for field trips.

“My aunt would love that children will be coming. She never had any of her own, but she loved them,” says Prior.

Prior met with Abilities Ottawa to conduct an accessibility audit. Along with Friends of Carp River, Gloutney and El-Chantiry, Prior’s attended other meetings focused on future Carp River projects, including reforestation of parts of her property. Prior has also spoken as a wetlands ambassador at a DUC major gift event in Ottawa to encourage support for DUC.

“It’s hilarious, because I’m being treated like an expert. The only thing I’m an expert at is getting other people to do my work!” says Prior.

Prior’s passion has people listening. As she gets closer to making her sensory garden a reality, she does so with her aunt Herma’s outdoor-loving spirit at heart.



Landowner Susan Prior knew her riverside property on the Carp River near downtown Ottawa had potential to be a natural oasis for wildlife. Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) assisted with her vision by preparing a project plan and working with a variety of partners to assemble the funding, with the lead funding coming from the City of Ottawa and the Government of Canada's National Wetland Conservation Fund administered by Environment and Climate Change Canada. The property now includes four restored wetlands that attract nesting waterfowl like mallards and hooded mergansers.