

Restoring Balance, Reclaiming Nature

Opelika Plant Wars Program Offers Information, Volunteer Opportunities

On Saturday morning, Sept. 21, local residents have an opportunity to help restore ecosystem balance in Opelika's Municipal Park and in their own yards through the first-ever Opelika Plant Wars educational and workday planned for 8:30 a.m. until noon.

The event, which is co-sponsored by the City of Opelika's Parks and Recreation Department, Alabama Invasive Plant Council (ALIPC), Opelika Kiwanis Club, Keep Opelika Beautiful and the Lee County Master Gardeners, focuses on identifying and controlling invasive plants.

Invasive plants, defined by the U.S. Forest Service as non-native plant species that are capable of causing environmental, economic or human harm, often displace native species, reduce native wildlife habitat, disrupt important ecosystem processes and degrade recreation areas.

According to Nancy Loewenstein, executive director of ALIPC and a research fellow and invasive plant Extension specialist in Auburn University's School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences, millions of dollars are spent each year controlling these plants across the nation. But invasive plants also impose a "cost" on nature as, over time, they replace native plant species, impact wildlife habitat and affect the functioning of local ecosystems.

Because so many of these plants, such as Chinese privet and thorny olive (*Elaeagnus*), are common in the landscape, many people don't even know they are detrimental.

"Winning the war against invasive plants, and thereby helping our native ones, will be a long battle," said Dee Smith, curator of Auburn University's Donald Davis Arboretum and an ALIPC member. "Nurseries still sell some of these plants and some have become such a staple in our landscapes that people are unwilling to eliminate them. They opt for the 'wait and see' approach. The unfortunate thing about this strategy is that, by the time we really see the problem, the opportunity to easily fix it is gone."

The aim of Opelika Plant Wars is to begin educating landowners and homeowners on how to identify harmful plants and teach them effective, environmentally sound ways to remove such plants from their property.

The event will begin at 8:30 a.m. at the Municipal Park's pavilion with an informational session led by Loewenstein and other ALIPC board members. This session will offer information on how to identify the top 10 invasive culprits as well as techniques for removing them from landscapes.

Following the educational program, participants are invited to join a work session in the park aimed at eliminating some of these plants from play areas of the park and the adjoining Caroline Dean

Wildflower Trail.

“The Caroline Dean Wildflower Trail has been an excellent addition to the Opelika Municipal Park, said Matthew Battles, municipal area supervisor for Opelika’s Parks and Recreation Department. “Over the past couple of years the Lee County Master Gardeners have really put a lot of time and effort into the trail. It is a wonderful area for visitors to come relax under the shade trees and learn about some of our native plant life. The Plant Wars program is a great way for the community to get involved and help to make the park an even better place to visit while learning about different types of invasive and native plants.”

According to Billie Oliver, a Lee County Master Gardener who is helping organize the event and volunteers regularly to help develop and maintain the wildflower trail, this program is ideally suited for the trail area, which is dedicated to native plants. Caroline Dean is an Opelika resident and honorary Lee County Master Gardener who is a nationally known expert on native plants.

“The Caroline Dean Wildflower Trail was created as a walking trail by the Opelika Kiwanis Club and the City of Opelika in recognition of Mrs. Dean’s dedication to plant education and preservation,” said Oliver.

“In summer of 2010, Mrs. Dean requested that Master Gardeners improve the walking trail by adding native azaleas and wildflowers from her garden,” Oliver continued. “Improvements to the trail, accessed through the historic Salem Shotwell Bridge over Rocky Brook Creek, would obviously benefit our community and surrounding areas. Planting a native plants garden offered the opportunity to enhance a natural area for relaxation and to encourage visitors to learn about native plants that they might enjoy in the home landscape and that would also attract birds, bees and butterflies.”

Oliver and her fellow volunteers have been working hard to install native plants in the area and eliminate invasive plants, especially from the lower section of the trail, and create a healthy space for native plants.

“The concentration of Chinese privet and *Elaeagnus* along Rocky Brook Creek and the edges of the wildflower trail compete for light, water and soil nutrients and crowd out the less aggressive native trees and shrubs,” she explained.

Removal of aggressive non-native plant species has been an on-going process,” she said. “Master Gardeners are involved in Plant Wars on Sept 21 because our goal is to give people the information they need to make good decisions about control of invasive plants for their homes and their public spaces.”

The Plant Wars workday is also a chance for local residents to help clean up parts of the park, including the trail. “Volunteers have the opportunity to help restore ecological balance within the park so that all

who visit will have a greater appreciation of the natural beauty of the stream and the woodland,” said Oliver. It’s also a chance for residents to get hands-on experience in invasive plant control that they can take home and use in their own yards.

Individuals or groups who are interested in attending and volunteering in the community can simply show up that morning and join in the Plant Wars event. Though tools will be available for use by volunteers, participants are encouraged to bring along their own gloves, pruning clippers, loppers and hand saws and to wear protective shoes or boots and long-sleeved shirts and long pants.

Loewenstein noted that the methods taught and used during the event are safe, effective and comply with all Alabama Department of Environmental Management regulations.

“We hope this will be the start of an ongoing cleanup effort at the park and educational process for the public so that we can all make our landscapes healthier and more attractive,” said Battles.

To learn more contact Oliver at billieoliver@gmail.com or Battles at MBattles@ci.opelika.al.us or call 334-705-5547 (Denson Drive Recreation Center).