

**MEMBERSHIP FORM**

The Friends of High School Park invite you to begin or renew your membership. Join our efforts to beautify and appreciate our 11-acre, native species park.

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\$25 Individual Membership  \$40 Family Membership  New Membership  New Renewal  
 Additional Contribution Enclosed:  \$10  \$35  \$75  \$100  Other  Cash  Check

This gift is in honor or memory of \_\_\_\_\_

This gift is given anonymously, please do not list my name in the newsletter.

Please make checks payable to: **Friends of High School Park** All contributions are tax-deductible.

Members and volunteers enjoy the camaraderie of working together and of attending educational programs. Please check any activity in which you have interest:

Arts in the Park  Communications  Education  Fundraising  Adopt a Plot  
 Membership  Restoration  Work Days

MAIL YOUR DUES AND/OR CONTRIBUTION TO: FRIENDS OF HIGH SCHOOL PARK • 7910 MONTGOMERY AVE • ELKINS PARK, PA 19027

Thank you very much! You will receive our newsletter announcing events and activities in the park.



FRIENDS OF  
**High School Park**

**7910 Montgomery Ave  
 Elkins Park, PA 19027  
 215-782-8082**

**www.highschoolpark.org**

**Arts <sup>IN</sup> THE Park**

**JUNE 5, 2011 • 10-5pm  
 RAINDATE: JUNE 12TH**



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**NEWSLETTER**

Robin Eisman, *Editor*

Sue Harvey, *Design*

**TO REACH FHSP**

www.highschoolpark.org

215-782-8082

7910 Montgomery Avenue

Elkins Park PA 19027

**IN THIS ISSUE:**

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- Tales from the Trails
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- Backyard Natives Garden Opening
- Winter WarmUp RoundUp

**FROM THE MEADOW RESTORATION STEERING COMMITTEE:**

**Meadow Makeover**

*By Amy Steffen*

One of the most popular areas in the park will undergo a complete makeover beginning this spring. As called for in the 2007 master plan for the restoration of the entire park, the meadow, which currently contains both native plants and non-native invasives, will be essentially wiped out and re-established with native grasses and perennials. Existing drainage issues, particularly stormwater management, in the meadow and adjacent areas will be addressed. Paths will be realigned to avoid wet areas and narrowed to ten feet (enough for three people to walk abreast). The contours of the meadow will be renovated a bit, with meadow grasses covering a wider area, spreading outward to the trees, shrubs and berms along the edge. Most importantly, once the native plant meadow is re-established, it will provide greater food and habitat for wildlife, and not serve as a source of invasive plants for surrounding areas.

A typical meadow in our region should include warm-season grasses such as broomsedge, little bluestem and Indian grass, and flowers such as milkweed, native sunflower and goldenrod. Currently these plants are in short supply in the High School Park meadow. Some areas are characterized by a decent assemblage of native plants, but in large areas, non-native grasses predominate, and there are several invasive species of concern. The most challenging for the restoration project are Canada thistle, porcelain berry, Oriental bittersweet, crown vetch and common reed. Design work and detailed planning have already begun.

The restoration effort is guided by a citizens' Steering Committee working with the landscape architecture firm Wells Appel. Friends of High School Park staff and volunteers, Township staff, neighbors, and staff from similar organizations, such as Pennypack Ecological Restoration Trust and the Tookany-Tacony-Frankford Watershed Partnership, serve as Steering Committee members and provide input and expertise. The Wells Appel team includes landscape designers and meadow restoration experts, among others.

The entire restoration process will take about three years; it will take a full year or so to remove invasive plants and prepare the site. As called for in the restoration plan, the initial step is treating the meadow with an herbicide (glyphosate) to kill the non-native invasives (and all other plants there). Other methods were discussed but aren't considered feasible: for example, hand-pulling individual invasives would require an expert to identify the plants and massive amounts of labor, while covering the meadow with a thick layer of mulch or compost would make the soil incompatible with native grasses. Because the soil, after treatment, will still contain seeds of undesirable plants (in the "seed bank"), the meadow will need to be treated several times to maximize the chances of successfully re-establishing a native ecosystem. (Glyphosate kills only growing plants, not seeds, so treatments are timed for the active growing season.) The first



*Native Milkweed*

## President's Letter, Spring 2011

By Martha Mowry

It's a brand new year, and, at the park, we are expecting it to be another exciting and productive one. Last year the BIG event was the planting of the Backyard Natives Garden in September. This year it will be the start of the meadow restoration, a project that will take much planning and effort over a three-year period. We're ready to get started and hope you will want to participate in this transformation also.

We've had a few other changes as well in recent months. We had our annual membership meeting in January and welcomed Dan Wasserman to the Board. Dan is a social worker and lives on Harrison Avenue so he can keep an eye on the park easily. Dan has been quite active in volunteer work in the park since moving to the neighborhood and we are thrilled to have him more involved in the organization. He will serve on the Development Committee.

Unfortunately we had to say good-bye to long time board member Jo Fagan. Jo has co-chaired the Park Restoration and Management (PRAM) Committee for a number of years and has been very active in workdays and other FHSP activities. While we will miss her good counsel on the board, she has already demonstrated that her involvement will not flag, as she is remaining on the PRAM committee, so we are grateful for that and for all her good work and advocacy in the past. She has been a terrific role model for the rest of us!

We have our second student intern this spring which is making the administrative and communications load a bit lighter for a number of people. Doug Martin is a senior at Penn State Abington and we thank him for choosing FHSP and for the support he is providing while learning about the inner workings of a small non-profit.

You might know that we held a Winter WarmUp event in February. The weather gods and goddesses were kind and dumped the rain and snow elsewhere that weekend. We had a great turnout, an interesting and diverse silent auction and a lot of fun dancing the night away in Glenside Hall. I suspect this will become an annual event and we hope to see more of you next year.

And our *Precious Places* film premiered at the Kimmel Center on April 11th. We saw a preview at the Winter WarmUp and it is a gem...just like the park!!

We're happy to welcome back the Creekside Coop farmers' market that was very successful and very popular in its inaugural year last year. It is on Sundays, starting in mid-spring—as of this writing, the first date is scheduled for May 1—so if you're reading this over your Sunday brunch on May 1 or May 8, get thee over to the Park! (*Check the Coop website for details: <http://creekside.coop/>*.)

**Arts in the Park** is scheduled for Sunday June 5th. We have a diverse group of artists again this year. You may not know this but we turn over a large fraction of the artists each year through a jury process. That seems to keep the event fresh, and of course we're always thinking of other ways to tweak it. For example, this year we're going to try to make the bake sale more of a "take home your dessert" arrangement so any of you out there who are great bakers, please let us know and help us make this piece an even greater success. And of course, we'll be counting on the weather gods and goddesses again for good weather...all good vibes in that direction are encouraged.

Much more to report, but getting too lengthy here so read the other articles and you'll find out all you need to know. Lastly, I want to congratulate Gina, Ben and Anneliese Craigo on the arrival of their new baby girl, Eva, in early March. New beginnings are so joyous...reminds me of spring and the park coming to life and workdays and AIP...

## FHSP WORK DAYS

All Work Days are on Saturdays and Sundays from 10:00 AM - Noon



Join us for a couple of hours eliminating invasive plants, clearing and wood chipping paths, planting, and other tasks on Work Days. We can lend you gloves and tools. Please wear closed shoes, long sleeves and pants and bring a refillable water bottle!

- April 30 & May 1
- May 14 & 15
- May 21 & 22
- June 11 & 12
- June 25 & 26
- July 9 & 10
- July 23 & 24
- August 6 & 7
- August 20 & 21
- September 10 & 11
- September 24 & 25
- October 15 & 16
- October 29 & 30
- November 5 & 6

## FHSP Member List from page 10

Deborah Weinstock-McCurdy & Glenn McCurdy  
Christine Weiser & Robert Giglio  
Nancy Wolfson & Jeremy Jaffe  
Lydia & James Zappacosta  
Babette Zemel

### Trillium Level - \$100-\$249

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### In Memory or Honor of

- Jakes from Bernard Handler
- Buddy & Belle Dzubow from Leslie & Rick Dzubow
- Gail Kogen Gottlieb from Florence Kogen
- Martha Mowry from Anonymous
- Eileen Feldman
- Terry & Kim Sokoloff
- Caroline Nickel from Lois Dicker

## MISSION STATEMENT

*The Friends of High School Park is a non-profit volunteer organization whose mission is to create, manage and preserve a viable native ecosystem in High School Park for the enjoyment of the community, in cooperation with Cheltenham Township. We are dedicated to inspiring the community to connect with others and the natural environment through service and learning connected with the park.*

## ADPOT A PLOT!

*Yes, I'd like to adopt a 10' x 10' plot in the Park!*

*When a FHSP member adopts a plot in our 11-acre park, a large part of our native plant sanctuary is cared for and the work of many hands makes for light work year round.*

*We are seeking friends to adopt their own 10' x 10' area in the park and care for it. Each adoptee will enjoy their own personal training session learning:*

- Native & Invasive Plant Identification & Management
- Composting • Tool Primer

*You will learn how to effectively keep invasive plants at bay and help us to replace them with native plants.*

**Register today at [info@fhsp.org](mailto:info@fhsp.org)**  
or call the office for details (215-782-8082)

## FHSP & Whole Foods!

Donate to FHSP through the "nickel-back" donation program at Whole Foods Market on the Fairway in Jenkintown. Bring your own shopping bag and get a 5-cent discount, which you can keep or donate to the FHSP by putting a "wooden nickel" token the cashier gives you into the box at the exit.



## FHSP Member List

### Individual Donors - \$25

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Jennifer & Dan Wasserman,  
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Linda Watson-Patterson  
Diana Weiner & John Story

continued on page 11

## A VIDEO ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL PARK: Precious Places

Community. That word kept cropping up any time we interviewed anyone about High School Park, while making our video about our beloved green oasis just blocks from the Philadelphia city line.

This video is part of the *Precious Places* series of videos on neighborhoods in Philadelphia and the nearby vicinity that is sponsored by the nonprofit Scribe Video Center. The series is a community oral history project in which members of Philadelphia's many neighborhoods document the buildings, public spaces, parks, landmarks and other sites that hold the memories of our communities and define where we live. Unlike oral history projects in other cities, *Precious Places* teaches the video production process to participating groups, fostering authorship by those who intimately know the featured neighborhoods.

We were honored to have Scribe choose High School Park as one of the nine places featured in the *Precious Places* project this year. Our video, which premiered at the Kimmel Center on April 11th as part of the inaugural Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts, began last summer when we gathered the history of our park from local residents and archival material. In a nutshell, that process revealed that the original Cheltenham High School was once a thriving community center, but rapidly declined in the 1980s when the last school to occupy the site—Beth Jacob—went bankrupt. It then became a magnet for vandals who terrified the nearby community and eventually set the school building on fire. Shortly afterwards, when Cheltenham Township acquired county funds to turn the site into a park, the community came together to form Friends of High School Park. This organization worked with the Township to restore native vegetation to the park that would serve as habitat for wildlife and provide a peaceful green oasis that everyone could enjoy.

Hearing the word "community" spoken so many times, in reference to the park and the original high school that once stood on its grounds, led us to make community a major focus of our video. That was actually the easy part. The hard part was filming and editing the video because none of us FHSP board members had experience in film production, especially the latest in digital technology that was required to complete the video. Although Scribe loaned us the equipment we needed, and gave us an oral historian and video expert to guide us, the bulk of the work still fell on our shoulders.

By Margie Patlak

But once again, the community came to the rescue. We sent an e-mail to all our members asking for help with the project and several of those members played a major role in filming and editing the film. Claire Meyer, Trisha Shore, Ken Thomas, and John Stritzinger helped with the filming. Ken helped in gathering archival material and in the video editing process. Trisha Shore took



Margie Patlak introduces the first screening of *Precious Places* at the Winter WarmUp event.

on a major role by agreeing to learn the film editing software, and then did much of that editing on her own, with the help of Ken and the folks at Scribe. Ron Kanter, our video consultant, then put in quite a bit of his own time doing the final polished video edit. And of course the project would never have gotten underway if Caroline Stritzinger, Amy Steffen, and Martha Mowry hadn't done the initial interviews with local residents, Martha and Gina Craig hadn't gathered some of the old photos of the high school and alumni, Rebekah Buchanan hadn't advised us on interview technique, and our intern Julia Hudson hadn't spent numerous hours transcribing the three hours of footage we shot. Thanks to all of you!\*

So the end result is that a film about—and by—the local community now exists and should help tremendously in our efforts to secure the funding we need to continue to restore and maintain High School Park. And hopefully the video we made, and will put up on our website and YouTube, will inspire other community groups to take the reins and transform the dreams they have for their neighborhood into reality.

*\*Editor's Note: Margie Patlak is a board member and organized and coordinated the entire project, and also conducted some of the interviews. This film would not have been possible without her championing it and putting in much of the effort. So, despite her modesty, kudos and a million thanks to you, Margie!*

Photo by John Stritzinger

## Tales from the Trails By Diana K. Weiner

**T**alk about being lucky! Karlyn is a neighbor of the park and a garden designer. She stopped by the office last fall to ask if we wanted some plants – she had extra after renovating her own garden. There aren't too many donations we turn down around here so I was happy to oblige! We met in the park and I showed her where her plants might go and what was happening.

We walked down Alumni Path to see several of the areas that have been adopted so far through our "Adopt a Plot" program. The top of the path sported four different species of native sedge plants we were trying out with two new "plotters" (plot adopters). Two species of sedge were thriving near the witchhazel that was donated last fall. We looked at the tree "cookie slices" that another "plotter" was arranging to serve as stepping stones (a mini nature playscape) for young and happily aging alike. I talked of the "plotters" at the creekside below, bravely weathering the storms of the past few years, with the mighty rains that take away another foot of their plot each time.

**Adopt a Plot and Work Days** are just two of the ways neighbors can commit to the mission of the Friends of High School Park. While membership, Arts in the Park, and special events like our Winter WarmUp help us pay our bills, and grants provide funds for educational programs and to purchase tools, equipment, and native plants, it is the labor that members and others provide that allow us to directly accomplish our main goals—restoring and maintaining our native ecosystems. It is these wonderful adults and kids who bring the shovel to the earth and the plants to their new homes. Last year 1300 hours were dedicated to our park by volunteers. Web partners such as Koddler.com and Volunteermatch.com brought even more help. But while 11 acres may seem small, the continuous invasives management and other maintenance requirements are overwhelming—and so we need more local friends to adopt a plot—a manageable spot to tend, visit and take a break from your own world to help in the bigger one.

The key here is that with many people coming to focus and concentrate on one project or area at a time, carrying it through from season to season, Adopt a Plot will improve every area of the park. Adopt a Plot is a personal way for you and your family or friends to "own" a 10' by 10' area in a public space. You choose where and manage it initially by removing the invasive plants that are present and planting natives to replace them. Then, depending on Mother Nature, and the amount of precipitation she grants us, you'll care for it by watering and



*Students from the Abington Friends School have enjoyed learning about the environment during a series of classes and community service late last fall and early this spring.*

weeding. But most importantly, you will watch it, enjoy it, and get to appreciate your plot through the seasons.

What a great community project for teens needing service hours for their Boy Scout badges, mitzva projects or other church or school mandates, or simply for a family project that gets everyone outdoors together for an hour on the weekend.

In the next few years, Adopt a Plot will especially help with the success of our meadow restoration project. Our 2.5-acre meadow will be going through a restoration process starting this spring; this process will take a few years to complete. Local landscape architect Stuart Appel and his firm Wells Appel will be leading us through the multi-phase project (see article on page 1). Volunteers will be needed to adopt 10' by 10' sections to plant and nurture. Our new meadow and edge ecosystems will need care and we need your help.

This spring the ornamental grass bed near the horseshoe entrance drive will be removed (along with the non-native grasses in it) just in time for our new Arts in the Park setup that will improve traffic flow. Being our biggest "guest day" of the year we want to have our best face showing. That area has already been adopted by Sophie Buckingham.

Karlyn chose to adopt a plot at the head of Alumni Path and graced us with her gift of asters and Joe Pye Weed.

Won't you surprise us like Karlyn did and show up at the office or shed door to help? We are only a phone call or email away. We appreciate your support. Look how we have grown with it!

See you in the park!

## Winter WarmUp RoundUp By Robin Eisman

**O**ur Winter WarmUp event was a success in terms of both fundraising and providing a fantastic evening of entertainment in those dreary late-winter days before the advent of the Flower Show and spring. The silent-auction-come-dance-party took place at Glenside Hall on Feb. 26 with over 120 attendees. A winter event had last taken place several years ago, and the Board decided in the fall to revitalize this event. Howard Solomon bravely volunteered to organize the event—or, as he put it, to be "nagger-in-chief" to the other Board members and additional volunteers who coordinated various details. Nag us he did, with wonderful results, so many thanks, Howard!

Many donors provided us with the items that were auctioned off. These generous donations allowed us to raise over \$8,000 that will provide needed funding for basic expenses beyond what grants, membership, and other donations provide: our two part-time staffers who keep everything running smoothly, money for plant material and the equipment used on workdays, and day-to-day expenses.

The entire Board showed up to set up the event all the way through checkout at the end of the evening. The evening itself featured a roomful of items and gift certificates being bid on and continuous music provided by a great DJ, Evan Hoffman from No Macarena, who got lots of attendees up and dancing. Food was provided by a catering service/restaurant, Yo!Catering, located right across the street from High School Park – can't get more local than that! The highlight of the evening was the screening of the video about High School Park for "Precious Places" (see article on pg. 3); while the official public



*FHSP member Ronit Sugar considers making a bid at the Winter WarmUp event.*

screening of the video was in April at the Kimmel Center, this was the first time it was seen on a large screen, and we were all thrilled with the results. When not bidding on items, guests mingled, chatted, danced, met new people, and generally seemed to have a great time—so we'll probably do it again next year, and we hope to see you there.



*Our fearless and matchless employees, Diana K. Weiner, Restoration Manager (left) and Gina Craigo, Operations Manager.*

### WINTER WARMUP DONOR LIST:

AFC Gym • Elayne Aion • Sue Aistrop • Mary Amar • Baker Creative • Thomas Balshi, DDS, FACP; Glenn J. Wolfinger, DMD, FACP, James R. Brown, DMD, FACP • Cliff Bassman • Kathleen Bennethum • Beth Sholom Synagogue Preservation Foundation • BizDev HQ LLC • Leora Brecher • Trish Breslin Miller • Dan Bronstein • Sharon Buckingham, Cabot Creamery Cooperative • Joanna Chodorowska, sports/nutrition coach • David Cohen • Congregation Beth Sholom • Nancy & Marc Cortez • Ben & Gina Craigo • Etz Chaim Wine and Mitzvah Stop • Jim & Lois Duffin • Patty Dougherty • David M. Engle Financial Advisor, Rule 144 Specialist, Morgan Stanley, Smith Barney • First Niagara Bank • Anne Foresman • The Frame House • Fresh Hair Salon • Tamar Godel • Chaya Herzberg • Noah Herzon • Hiway Theatre • Joan Horn • Alex Jacobs • Julie's Nail and Spa • Dr. Elon Kaplan • Joanna Katz • Steve and Robin Katz • Gail Korostoff • Kristen Stein Fine Art • Kylin Arts, Kylin Mettler & Karen Hagen • Gail Laughlin • Roberta Lee • Jodie Levinson • Susan Lloyd • Marco Polo Restaurant • Max and David's Restaurant • Jackie McClellan • Kelly McShain Tyree • Brandi Millis • Robin Minkoff • Martha Mowry and family • Peg Mulligan • Aileen and Louis Piccone, Luigi's II Pizzarama • Jason Nejberger • Maria Odilia Romeu and Steven Oldham • Rhinoceros Toys • Pierre & Carlo European Salon & Spa • Susan Pillay • Primex Garden Center • Private Studio Guidebooks • Sabrina Restaurant • Schaff & Young, PC • Kathy Schoengold • Joye Schwartz • Scorpion Yoga and Fitness Studio • Howard Siegal • Rose Sluzas • Howard Soloman • Spitfire Designs • Mirjam Seeger • Shakti Yoga & Healing Arts • Krista Freyman • Sherlock's Salon • She's So Fine • Tom Stiegerwald • Caroline Stritzinger • John Stritzinger • Zeke Strober • Ronit Sugar • Joe Tabas • Anthony Taormina • Drs. Chess & Taub Family Dentistry • Tiffin Restaurant • Trader Joe's • Tranquil Waters • Marty Tuzman • Diana K. Weiner & John Story • Susan Weinberg • Debbie Weinstock • West Avenue Grill

## VOLUNTEER PROFILE:

### Tom Carboni

By Sanna Levine

When Tom Carboni returns home to Melrose Park from Center City in the evening, he sheds the suit and tie of his desk job, and, weather and daylight permitting, usually climbs on his tractor and mows his lawn, removes fallen branches, pulls stumps, plants trees, installs fences, or plows snow from neighbors' driveways. He uses the tractor every spring to spread mulch and haul logs in High School Park, and sometimes he uses his chainsaw to cut fallen trees. Sometimes he uses a winch or a wrench to help set up tables and tents for Arts in the Park, and sometimes he just uses his hands.

Tom's training as a civil engineer (BSCE, Virginia Military Institute, 1984) helps channel the restless energy that drives him to fix, build, repair and cultivate. So does his intuitive understanding of how the physical and mechanical worlds work. And so does the strong do-it-yourself tradition Tom and his wife, Debbie, come from. In the six years since the Carboni's moved to Cheltenham, Tom built a patio and a playground for his kids, pulled tree stumps on their property, and fixed the stucco and slate roof of their 108-year-old home. Tom's competencies aid his contributions to Cheltenham in general and High School Park in particular, but his community identification and an urgent need to help others are the dominant tools in his extensive toolkit.

"I like to build things," Tom said. "I like to help my neighbors." He routinely pulls out the tractor and helps them with heavy excavation, grading, and plowing snow. "It's a good way to get out there and meet my neighbors."

The same desire for community involvement drove Tom to run for Cheltenham commissioner in 2007. The commis-

### Meadow Makeover

treatment will be in May, the second in September, and a third treatment will be in the spring of 2012. All herbicide treatments will be done by a licensed herbicide applicator, and a fence will keep visitors out of the treated area. While a temporary grass cover will be added in September 2011, the true meadow grasses will not be seeded until spring of 2012; finally, native herbaceous perennials (wildflowers) will be planted—as young plants—in the spring of 2013.

Representatives from Wells Appel will present a brief



sioners are responsible for police, streets, fire, and economic development. A relative newcomer to the community and a Republican in an overwhelmingly Democratic district, he lost the campaign, but he values the door-to-door canvassing. "I met a lot of people in Melrose Park I wouldn't know otherwise," he said.

Tom transferred his commitment to Cheltenham's economic development to the Township's Economic Development Task Force (EDTF), where he was a volunteer from 2008 to 2010. The task force's job is to attract and help establish businesses in Cheltenham's five business districts: Glenside, Cheltenham Village, East Cheltenham Avenue, Elkins Park East (near the train station), and Elkins Park West (Yorktown shopping center). "More businesses mean lower residential taxes," he said.

Tom and Debbie live on Valley Road with their two children, Dominic and Alexis, and their two rescue dogs, Gabby and Jethro.

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overview of the meadow restoration plans at the regular Parks & Recreation Committee meeting on Weds. May 11, 7:30 pm, in Curtis Hall. Signage around the fenced area will explain the project. We can expect to miss the beauty of the meadow this year, but will enjoy it again in its improved state in 2012 and beyond.

We offer a big thank you to Cheltenham Township and the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for funding this restoration project.

## A BOTANICAL SUPERHERO:

### Switchgrass

By Diane Ehrich

Sometimes the most ordinary plant possesses the most remarkable properties. Imagine a plant that readily thrives in poor soils and difficult conditions, serves as a source for bio-fuel, removes toxins from contaminated soil, is being investigated for its ability to produce biodegradable plastic, provides excellent erosion control, creates vital habitat for native animals, birds, and butterflies, and is a gorgeous garden plant with many wonderful cultivars. Such a plant really does exist! Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), a common, warm season, tallgrass native to North America does all of this!

Native grasses, such as switchgrass, big bluestem, Indian grass, and purple-top, once covered much of the Midwest in vast, open prairies. Here in Pennsylvania, where most of the land was once dominated by forests, they grew in smaller meadows. Most of our native grasses are classified as "warm season" grasses. This means that they tend to emerge when the soil warms up in late spring and flower in late summer. They have large root masses and are very drought tolerant. They grow in clump forms, leaving bare ground between them, which provides pathways and nesting spaces for meadow-dwelling birds such as bobolinks and meadowlarks. When European settlers arrived here, they brought seeds for nonnative grasses to provide forage for their farm animals. These European grasses, such as orchardgrass and timothy, differed in significant ways from the local native grasses. Many of these introduced grasses are "cool season" grasses, meaning that they emerge early in the spring, when the soil is still cool, and flower in late spring. Their roots have less mass and they are less drought and heat tolerant than warm season grasses. They form mats of turf, as opposed to the clump-forming native grasses. You would recognize many of these cool season grasses as the grasses in your lawn. There are indeed native cool season grasses, but the warm season species dominated most of our grasslands.

Switchgrass, growing to between four and six feet tall, with bluish green leaves and topped with large, airy flower sprays, is a wonderful example of the versatile role that native grasses play in our environment. Its massive, deep, fibrous root system allows it to survive in adverse conditions and makes it very effective for controlling soil erosion. Because it is a tallgrass, it also protects soil from wind erosion. Although we usually associate plants that attract butterflies with brightly colored flowers, grasses are actually essential host plants for several butterfly species such as skippers and satyrs. Switchgrass is the host plant for the Delaware skipper and the dotted skipper, among others. Songbirds relish the seeds of switchgrass. Large stands of switchgrass intermingled with other native grasses and wildflowers provide habitat for meadow-dwelling birds and other animals.

In addition to all these ecological benefits, switchgrass offers remarkable solutions to modern problems. Scientists are researching switchgrass as a source of several renewable biofuels, includ-

ing cellulosic ethanol. It is a much more environmentally friendly and energy efficient ethanol source than corn. Switchgrass requires relatively little amounts of energy, fertilizer, or pesticide to cultivate, can be grown on marginal soil, and the whole plant can be used to produce ethanol.

Corn, on the other hand, requires a large expenditure of energy and fertilizers, and ethanol is derived from only the kernels. Switchgrass can also be compressed into pellets that are burned in pellet stoves to heat homes, replacing wood fuel. Switchgrass is, in addition, being explored as a source of biogas. Biogas is a gas produced when organic material is broken down in the absence of oxygen, a process known as anaerobic fermentation. Biogas can be used as an alternative fuel for heating homes and for cooking.

In addition to all these innovative uses, switchgrass is being studied for its ability to produce biodegradable plastic! Scientists have genetically altered switchgrass with genes from nitrogen-fixing bacteria; these bacteria naturally produce polymers with properties similar to those of polypropylene (a synthetic polymer made from petroleum). This allows the plants to produce these natural polymers, or "bioplastics", which can be "biodegraded" by bacteria and other microorganisms in the environment. Although switchgrass doesn't yet produce enough bioplastic to be commercially viable, this research is an interesting approach to finding environmentally friendly alternatives to petroleum-based products.

Another creative and effective use of switchgrass is for phytoremediation. Phytoremediation uses certain plants for cleaning up toxins, heavy metals, and other pollutants in the soil. These plants absorb the harmful contaminants when their roots take up water from the soil. The contaminants are then stored in the roots, stems, and leaves of the plants, which are then simply harvested and processed to dispose of, or at least safely store, the toxins. Because phytoremediation takes advantage of natural processes, it requires less labor and equipment to clean up polluted areas and limits the contact between people and toxins.

So, can such a workhorse of a plant look attractive in your garden? Absolutely! Switchgrass has sturdy upright deep green to



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## AFTER SIX YEARS: Backyard Natives Garden Opens May 15

By Sanna Levine

After six years of planning, funding, digging, labeling, and planting, the Backyard Natives Garden in High School Park will officially open to the public on Sunday, May 15 at 1 pm.

The Backyard Natives Garden and the Backyard Natives Plant Guide demonstrate the native plants that can thrive in home gardens in Eastern Pennsylvania. Because the plants in the demonstration garden evolved here and thrived without human intervention for millions of years, they require little maintenance once established. Sited correctly around a house, the trees demonstrated in the garden can reduce heating/cooling costs and dependence on fossil fuels.

Plants in the garden are labeled, so visitors can jot down the names of plants they'd like to acquire for their own gardens. The Backyard Natives Plant Guide (available electronically at [www.highschoolpark.org](http://www.highschoolpark.org) and in hard copy by request) describes growing requirements, such as light and rain, so home gardeners can match plants with their own garden's conditions.

The Backyard Natives Garden transformed 2,500 square feet near the corner of Harrison Street and Montgomery Avenue from a barren space into a colorful bed of native plants that will flower and bloom throughout three seasons. The garden will also absorb storm-water runoff from the paved commuter parking lot above it that would otherwise drain into the 11.5-acre High School Park.

### Switchgrass

bluish green stems and foliage, which turn golden yellow to deep burgundy in the fall. In July and August, it forms airy, open, pinkish tan flower panicles that mature to a darker purple. Switchgrass needs full sun to thrive, but it tolerates drought, heat, flooding, and a wide range of soil types. It requires little care, needing only to be cut back once a year in late winter. It can be used as a specimen plant, creating a tall focal point in a perennial bed, planted in a mass for screening, or grown in a large container. And there are many lovely cultivars of switchgrass which offer a choice of leaf colors and plant heights: 'Heavy Metal' grows to about 5 feet with very stiff, bluish green leaves and pink flower plumes; 'Shenandoah' grows to approximately 4 feet and is notable for its dark burgundy fall color; 'Cloud Nine' grows to 6 feet, has dark gold fall foliage, and is topped by clouds of silvery flower sprays; 'Northwind' grows to 5 feet with a narrower, more erect form and golden yellow fall foliage; 'Dallas Blues' grows to 5 feet with broad gray-



The Backyard Natives Garden is part of High School Park's \$13,000 TreeVitalize Watershed Project, funded by the PA Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and Aqua PA. The Watershed Project's purpose is to add tree cover to the steep hillside between the upper meadow and Tookany Creek and to the "edge community" at the periphery of the upper meadow. It also provides the trees and other plants for this native plant garden.

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ish blue foliage and flowers later in the season than most of the other cultivars with reddish purple plumes. 'Dallas Blues' is growing in High School Park's own Backyard Natives Garden by the entrance on Montgomery Avenue. These cultivars of switchgrass are among the many that are readily available at garden centers. You can easily find one that is right for your garden.

As the Friends of High School Park begins planning for the renovation of the 2-acre meadow on the upper level of our park, with the assistance of landscape architecture firm Wells Appel, we will be choosing native grasses such as switchgrass to create a diverse and healthy ecosystem. Look for switchgrass's airy seedheads and tall upright clumps as our new meadow grows. Tough and beautiful, essential for wildlife, resonating with our natural heritage, and full of promise for environmentally friendly biotechnologies, switchgrass is truly a super plant!

## SPRING/SUMMER 2011: Programs and Events

FRIDAY, APRIL 29, 10AM

### Arbor Day Celebration at High School Park

Please join us for the 23rd Annual Cheltenham Township Arbor Day Tree Planting at High School Park. We will celebrate by planting a river birch (*Betula nigra*) at the High School Road entrance near the Tookany Creek. Contact the organizer of the event, Anthony Birdsong, for more information, at: LaMott Community Center, Cheltenham Township, 7420 Sycamore Avenue, LaMott, PA 19027 215-635-3255 215-887-6200, ext. 761 [www.cheltenhamtownship.org](http://www.cheltenhamtownship.org) FREE

MONDAY, MAY 9, 5-7 PM

### Evening Bird Walk with Ruth Pfeffer

Evenings in spring are a perfect time to listen to nature and spy birds passing through on their way to their summer homes. This is the first time we have offered this late afternoon/evening program. Learn about the various birds that visit High School Park with noted local bird expert Ruth Pfeffer. We will have a little "nosh" for you to eat as we walk around the park on a wonderful day in May. FREE

SUNDAY, MAY 15, 8-10 AM

### Spring Birding with Ruth Pfeffer

Our park serves as a breeding ground for birds and beneficial insects. Spring is the peak season, and morning the peak time, to observe songbirds as they migrate to their summer destinations. Many different insects are attracted to our meadow, edge community, woodlands and creek as well. Our Restoration Manager (and hobby entomologist) Diana K. Weiner will join Ruth Pfeffer in pointing out plants throughout the park that insects are attracted to and Ruth will point out which birds visit them for a free meal. Please bring a pair of binoculars and wear sturdy, comfortable shoes. FREE

SUNDAY, MAY 15TH, 1-2 PM

### Ribbon Cutting – Backyard Natives Garden

See the article in this newsletter about our new plot containing native trees, shrubs and perennials that you may want to use in your own garden. Help us celebrate! FREE

SUNDAY, JUNE 5TH, 10 AM - 5 PM

### Arts in the Park! Rain date: Sunday June 12th

The one and only, 16th annual Arts in the Park festival!! See the flyer in this issue, or visit our website for details. \$5 suggested donation for adults. Separate fee for children's activities.

### MEET THE INTERN:

## Douglas Martin

Coming in with the New Year was a fresh intern for the first five months of 2011. Meet Douglas Martin, who is in his final semester at Penn State Abington. Doug is a Corporate Communication major and our communications intern here at the Friends of High School Park office. He is a Philadelphia-area native and currently lives in Fox Chase, Philadelphia. He attended the University of San Francisco, where he was an Entrepreneurship major, before coming to Penn State.

Doug has been working on various projects throughout his internship, such as fliers, brochures, press/media releases, event listings, and other promotional materials. Doug has helped promote events such as "Maple Sugaring at the Park" and our first annual "Winter WarmUp". His contribution has helped turn these events into a success. Since the "Winter WarmUp", Doug has been focusing on our 16th annual "Arts in the Park" event, as well as preparations for a number of spring and summer programs. Doug hopes to see you at these programs in the park this spring.

In his free time our intern enjoys comparing Eastern and Western philosophies, particularly Zen philosophy, as well as listening to conscious music, exploring foreign cultures, and navigating the geo-political scene. Doug considers his time with FHSP so far to be extremely beneficial in terms of experiential wisdom. "A student can learn much theory in school, but only until you truly demonstrate the skills you learned in real world practicality do you fully attain the knowledge. Humans learn through experience and that is why this internship has been very beneficial for me so far", Doug commented. Douglas recommends the Friends of High School Park as a great opportunity for college seniors to attain irreplaceable experience and complete an internship. He considers his time with FHSP as extremely rewarding, especially the knowledge he gained from the many unique tasks he carried out as its communications intern.

