



## A Soft Landings\* Planting Beneath a Keystone Tree

### *Connecting Habitat Neighbor to Neighbor*

*by Vicki Joy Bonk*

*An early November photo of the project beneath our neighbor's Sugar Maple. Our yards glowed! The zig-zag goldenrod pictured here, thrived and invited a rich diversity of pollinators, and was for many the last feast of the 2023 growing season.*

### **Part 6 - April 2024**

**Watching Weather.** What a long, strange winter trip, it's been. In the 2023/24 winter season, the absence of the usual snow cover and the string of unusually warm days, was unsettling. A bit of a time warp waiting for winter to finally arrive rather than spring. Finally, in late March, the most snow of the season arrived and the white-blanketed world was welcomed. With relief, April showers came and Minneapolis is no longer listed as abnormally dry, yet concerns of drought persist.

The quickly changing climate, gives stewardship of our small urban landscape, certain imperatives. There is focus on noting which native plants are thriving in the drier conditions in our yards and also in nearby natural areas. There is a stronger commitment to making our home habitat attractive to urban wildlife and to people alike. The hope is neighbors and passersby will see our space as a worthwhile venture for themselves. Nature needs partners.

**Spring Care.** When spring finally arrives in Minnesota, the urge to poke around in the garden comes natural. We'll continue leaving the leaves on the ground ( and not in gutters, the walk, near stormwater drains etc.). In early spring, many beneficial insects are not active yet, some are still in hibernation, nesting or in pupae form and they rely on leaves for cover. Additionally, the leaves act as a moisture retaining and nutrient rich mulch. No raking here.



*Left to right: Native plants emerging 4/2/24, Wild Columbine, Bottlebrush Grass and Heart-leaved Aster*

Instead, the first favorite task of spring is a plant inventory stroll. Making the rounds to look for those emerging, is an enjoyable endeavor in an established native plant perennial garden - like welcoming old friends. Each year holds some surprise to when and where, the green is first seen. This year, the shadier Soft Landings areas, brought a number of species back including wild strawberry, blue and Canada violets, bloodroot, wild ginger, heart-leaved aster, wild geraniums, wild columbine, bottlebrush grass, a number of woodland sedges, and ramps. More varieties will continue to follow. These plants are companion plants that form a natural community that hold a special beauty of an intrinsic “organization”, that resists looking “messy”. Most seem to be holding in the drier conditions.

The home garden tours, inspire the next steps. What works and what to build on? What plants would enhance the current situation? Give more form? Add blooms add a specific time? How can I partner and rearrange what’s here to the benefit of the naturescape and to please the human eye too? What wildlife to invite and what are their needs? The answers to these questions will evolve in the next couple of weeks, as our habitat grows. So far, more wild columbine will be planted for early spring blooms and to attract pollinators including hummingbirds. Columbine being tolerant to a wide range of soil and light conditions, will allow them to fit right in.

**Another Take on Soft Landings.** Last summer we planted a small seedling Downy Serviceberry in our yard, as a keystone understory tree to the neighboring Sugar Maple. The serviceberry now resides in area where plants have struggled with advancing shade and other unknown problems. Last season a number of species were planted beneath the serviceberry. I had been regarding the SL projects as native plantings under mature trees, that lacked a native ground cover. The originator of Soft Landings, Leslie Pilgrim, expanded my view, by stating that the project works naturally paired with the planting of a new tree. Well, of course! Here’s a new approach to encourage native habitat and a good place for many people to start.

**Arbor Day Planting.** Wouldn’t a keystone tree planting be more complete if surrounded by a circle of native ground cover? Now that’s a notion worth promotion!