Afoot in the Field:
A Resource for Conservation Landowners in the Finger Lakes Region

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In our modern era of environmental awareness, we are conditioned to recognize and despise non-native species. But of course not all non-native species are "invasive" or problematic to our native flora and fauna. A recent discussion on the Land Trust list serve (a group e-mail exchange between land conservation practitioners from around the country) involved a large, attractive patch of daffodils in Massachusetts that is located on a nature preserve owned and managed by a local land trust. Word about the daffodils spread, and now thousands of people flock there each spring, causing lots of trampling, picking, wildlife disturbance, and visitor conflicts. Despite the headaches endured by the land trust, and despite the fact that the flowers are not native, they are considered a treasure by the locals and the land trust would not dare pull them up to solve their problem.

Chris Olney

I have to admit my own affinity for daffodils, periwinkle, lilacs, and some other non-native but non-invasive ornamentals that have crept into our natural areas (or more typically, they have stayed put at the old farmsteads where they were planted but then abandoned, surviving decades of forest succession in the surrounding area). My favorite non-native plants of all, however, are "wild" apple and pear trees.

Whenever I walk a new property that has hedgerows, young to medium-aged woods, or areas that were obviously part of old farms, I look for the old apple trees that are almost always inevitable. Old apples seem to be as reliable as old stone walls – it seems that no farmer from the 1800's would have a farm without either. What I really keep my eyes peeled for, though, is the tell-tale square-check bark that is characteristic of old pear trees. Being less common than apples, the pears seem more of a prize to me when found. Both are welcome additions in the labeled stack of local hardwoods that I keep in my barn for my meat smoker…

In this issue of Afoot in the Field we are fortunate to be able to share the expertise of recent easement donor John Rybinski, who has offered an article about tending wild apple and pear trees that you might find on your property. Putting in a little time to reinvigorate these trees will provide a benefit to wildlife, give you a feeling of satisfaction, and perhaps even bolster a more personal connection with past generations of landowners.

Chris Olney
Director of Stewardship

Conservation Landowner Prof le: John Rybinski

Q: This is our first landowner profile for Afoot in the Field with someone who went through the process of donating a conservation easement during the past few months. Your easement finalized and recorded just recently, on December 30, 2013. Please let us know when and how you first learned about conservation easements; how you came to work with the Finger Lakes Land Trust; and what the easement donation process has been like.

A: I have been interested in conservation issues my whole life, and have heard the term "conservation easement" often. I mentally associated conservation easements with right of ways for f shing access and knew of a few parcels of protected land. I had the impression that a conservation easement not only preserved the land but opened it up to the public in some fashion. Now I know this is not always true!

Katie and John Rybinski

About ten years ago, I purchased the f rst parcel where I live now and began researching ways to enhance and protect my investment, and make it more affordable. I called many preservation groups and eventually discovered the FLLT. From there, I started reading educational material provided by the Land Trust and the process got started. I wanted to make sure that the FLLT and a conservation easement were the best f t for what I was trying to accomplish. Meanwhile, my one parcel grew to three over those years, increasing to 248 contiguous acres.

For me, the process has three mental and physical steps. One is educate and commit; two is the f nancial obligation; and three is the process itself. The folks at the FLLT made the process easy as they walked me through the steps and helped facilitate each procedure with the professionals involved, including a land surveyor, appraiser, forester, and attorney. The f nancial burden has def nitely been the biggest hurdle for me but I have hopes of recouping the money down the road from the tax incentives associated with the donation.

Q: The conservation easement on your 248 acres in the Town of Pompey, Onondaga County, is the first FLLT conservation project in that town, or anywhere east of I-81. Why do you think it's important for the Land Trust to take on projects in the foothills of Syracuse, in that far-northeast part of the Finger Lakes region?

A: Being a lifelong resident of central New York, I have witnessed a drastic change in the landscape over the last 50 years. With this change, I have noticed the direct impact from the loss of habitat, diversity, and change in wildlife populations. Suburban sprawl has replaced much over time that was wildlife habitat of one type or another. The Syracuse area has seen unsustainable development

with no end in sight. My opinion is that one of the most pressing conservation issues we face now today is the loss of farmland and open space due to development, in all areas of the state and nation.

Q: When I first visited your property and met you, I saw a barn full of apples and many apple trees loaded with fruit. Tell us about your orchards and what you do with your harvest.

A: I especially enjoy gardening and my orchard. Growing and producing our groceries has been a way of life for me. It is very rewarding grafting, pruning, planting, caring for, harvesting, and consuming the end results of this hobby. This year the apple crop was abundant and I admit to harvesting far more than we could begin to use or give away. I froze over 25 gallons of organic apple juice and have several bushels in storage for baking and eating. The remains will feed the abundant wildlife that enjoys the habitat on my property.

Q: Please tell us about your conservation advocacy efforts and activities related to educating people around the state about wildlife management and conservation issues.

A: I have been interested in animals, plants, and conservation since before I was in grade school and have participated throughout my life as a member or volunteer with various groups. Two issues that I feel are very important are land/habitat preservation and deer management. Uncontrolled development and loss of our open spaces might be one of the worse things that can happen to us. This will lead to a direct loss of wildlife, air and water quality, agriculture, recreational space, and our beautiful New York landscape.

Going on 10 years now, I have been on an interesting journey of advocating for better deer management in NY State. My direct f ndings are that deer are simple to manage but state agencies can be less than interested in doing a better job. Of all states in our nation that have whitetail deer, NY ranks about third from the bottom in doing a good job of managing for a healthy herd. The NYSDEC still uses a management model from 1911, which interestingly was created to manage and grow a deer herd. The groups I have been active in have been advocating for using a new managing approach that helps correct the shortcomings of the current style. We have been successful in having this better method implemented in 11 wildlife management units so far. In a nut shell, most male deer are killed before they are adults in NY, still possessing their baby teeth. This does nothing to control deer populations, as only the removal of female deer help control population numbers. At the same time, the deer herd is severely lacking in adult male deer. In a healthy deer herd, there should be a balanced sex ratio and age structure in both male and female deer. Killing most of the juvenile male deer is unnatural and unhealthy and still leaves the deer herd to grow exponentially.

Deer are managed in 23 states using the method that we advocate for, including our neighbors Vermont and Pennsylvania. The DEC has found, through surveys, that the majority of deer hunters support this better management style. Where implemented, the harvest pressure is on female and adult male deer, not juvenile male deer. Data has shown that farmers in these areas are requesting half the number of deer damage permits than before, hunters are happier, and the deer herd is healthier. The program name is called “Yearling Buck Protection” or “Quality Deer Management”. Protecting immature yearling bucks increases the number of adult bucks, balancing the sex ratio, while at the same time placing more harvest pressure on the doe. It’s a simple, common sense concept that I spend many hours on to educate and advocate for, like a full time job!

Q: What are some of the short-term and long-term management goals for your property?

A: I have some short-term goals on my property. One is getting my woodlots headed in a better direction, as some have been high-graded and mismanaged for many years. New, younger generation crop trees are severely lacking in many areas and timber stand improvement cuts have been underway. Adding small watering holes or vernal pool-type small ponds for wildlife in several locations, especially for the amphibians, are on the short-term list also. One long-term goal is to procure more property adjacent to mine if it becomes available and is affordable. Another goal is to try to keep my habitat diverse for the long haul. Grasslands quickly become shrublands, and shrublands turn into forests. Overall, New York has been gaining in forested lands while at the same time loosing precious grass and shrub lands and the wildlife that inhabits it. My hope is to preserve a variety of habitat by actively managing it and not just setting it aside.

Q: Please describe your experience in leasing some of your land to a local farmer for agricultural production. Do you have any advice about leasing for other landowners?

A: Agricultural land adds to the diversity of the property and surrounding area, and can be needed habitat for many species. Tillable land in my area is in high demand and rent prices have climbed in recent times. One perk is the agricultural credits that you can claim against your property taxes. As in any business transaction, get a signed lease and have everything spelled out in a simple fashion; good communication is the key in any relationship.

Q: What is your most interesting and memorable wildlife sighting you've had on your property?

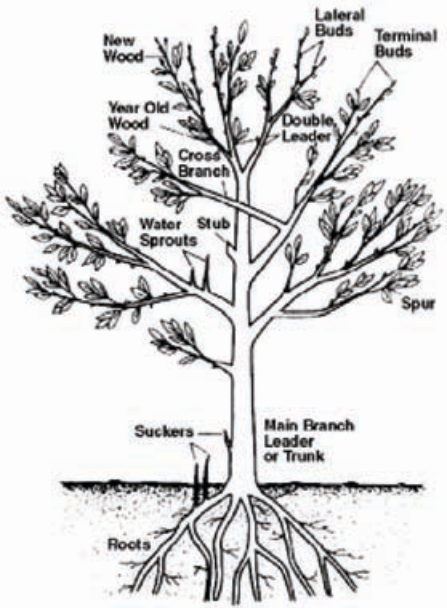
A: Viewing wildlife of all types is one of our family's favorite pastimes on our property. First sightings seem to be the most memorable. Just a few years ago, my wife and I saw our first black bear cross the road just down the street from our house. Last year, I saw my first fisher and this year, my first set of fisher tracks. This year's new sighting was a giant swallowtail butterfly. But maybe the most memorable is last year when a pair of beaver moved into our pond and raised 5 young. Many nights we would sit by the water's edge, feeding them apple treats, enjoying their presence and listening to their conversations. They even swam with our two boys!

John Rybinski

Care of Wild Apple Trees

by John Rybinski

Growing up in rural central New York, I have many memories of our farmstead's apple orchard. The trees in this orchard were resurrected after many years of being abandoned and left to grow wild. So wild in fact, that saplings had grown around and through the trees and needed to be cleared away before an intense pruning. Those trees produced many quality apples for our family for many years. Both apple and pear trees found in the wild can be salvaged in the same manner and produce a bounty for wildlife or personal use.



Source:
http://accu-measure.net/howtoprune.html

Wild apple trees are one of the non-native plants that made it on the "good list"; they originated in central Asia, then cultivated in Europe, and were eventually brought to North America. Today "wild" apple trees of all sizes and shapes are common in NY State. The smaller fruited varieties are referred to as crabapples. The difference between a crabapple and what we think of as an apple is the size of the fruit. Smaller than 1½" diameter is a crabapple; larger is a regular apple. A good tree can produce up to 20 bushels of apples in a year, so apples are one of the most important soft mast producing trees for wildlife in NY.

Apples prefer a well-drained site, full sun, and good soil, but can be found growing without any of these conditions. Apple is a favorite of many pests including various insects, fungi, blights, and diseases, but they can be grown successfully without chemical sprays. Today many hybrid varieties have been selected as disease tolerant requiring less care, and you may observe these traits in some wild apple trees. Another common problem that apple seems to have is a root structure that doesn't always support the tree. This is one of the reasons domestic apple trees are grafted commercially on root stock that has been selected for better support and certain growth habits. Overall, apple trees are very hardy in most of NY and can survive with little care. With minimal maintenance, a surviving tree can become a thriving tree producing lots of healthy fruit and live a long life.

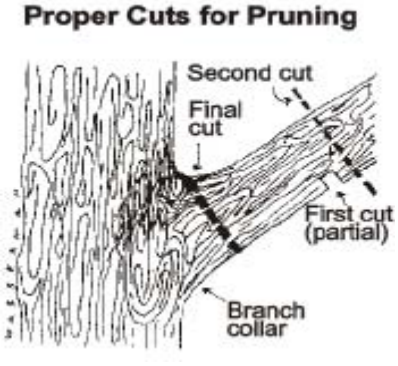
Fertilizing a tree is not necessary if it appears healthy, and it may even cause it to overproduce and break or uproot the tree. If the tree looks weak, has health issues, or you simply desire to push its production level, then I recommend a 10-10-10 granular fertilizer at the rate of 2 pounds per caliper inch measured 12" above the soil. Remember wild apple do not have

selected rootstock like most domesticated apple trees. An herbicide such as Round Up can be used to remove unwanted growth and competition around the tree after it has been cut if needed, as per label instructions.

I like to protect the trunks of young apple trees that I discover from rabbit and rodent damage with a ½" size galvanized wire or plastic mesh. I simply cut the mesh so that it fits very loosely around the tree allowing the tree to grow for many years inside this protector. I do not tie on the metal mesh, I just bend it so that, as the tree grows, it will open up over time not affecting the tree.

"Releasing" apple trees is the most helpful measure one can take to protect the health and longevity of a wild apple tree. Releasing means removing any vegetative competition, especially on the southern or western sides of a tree. Apple like full sun and any competition for the sun by neighboring trees, shrubs, and vines can impair the health and production of the tree. Simply remove the unwanted competition by cutting down with a saw, leaving plenty of room for air circulation and sunlight.

The one mistake I see is the pruning of wild apple trees with methods that are used for high commercial production and in turn are creating a higher maintenance tree. Commercially grown trees are pruned heavily to produce large, high quality fruit, as larger apples are worth more than smaller ones. These pruning methods tend to stimulate a tree to grow more "suckers" or "water sprouts", leading to more pruning. I feel it is less important with wild trees to be concerned with pruning for production but pruning to create a healthy low maintenance tree that requires less manpower. Most pruning methods have a lot in common, such as removing all dead wood, crossed branching, and interior branching. The idea is to open up the branching for better air flow and light distribution. Cuts should be made near the branch "collar", a raised ridge found at the base of every branch. Do not cut into this ridge with a flush cut or healing will be impaired.



Source: http://www.checkbook.org/interactive/tree/other/d/article.cfm

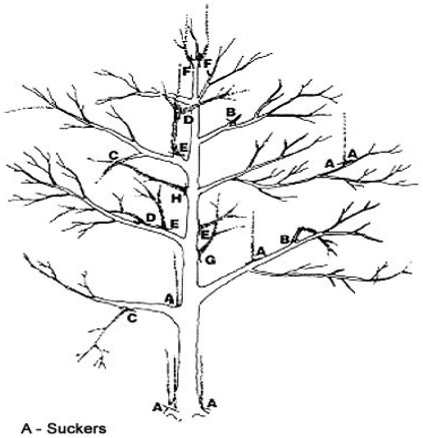
This is how I go about pruning a wild apple tree after it has been released of surrounding competition: First I use a smallchain saw to cut larger branches from the main trunk that are dead and that cross or grow into the interior. Wild trees tend to be thick branched and it may take some work pulling these limbs from the tree canopy after they are cut free. A pole saw is an important component of the arsenal, and I use both manual and power types, based on how large the limbs are. Then I use a good pair of bypass pruning

loppers as I remove any branches that look weak from lack of sunlight, removing thick interior growth and smaller dead wood that was left from the chainsaw process.

All suckers or water sprouts should be removed from the interior of the tree also. The tree should look light and airy when complete. Yearly follow up pruning should be minimal, many trees can go two years and repeat the above process on a smaller scale.

Vines, particularly grapes, can be very damaging to trees and should be severed, but it is not necessary to remove if they are too stubborn to pull free. Leave them severed for a year and they'll more or less fall off by themselves. Apple trees come in many shapes, depending where and how they are growing. If a tree looks lanky I may try to downsize it in height and width if I can reach these areas. Many times an extension ladder is needed, and maybe another person to assist. Extendable pole-type pruners can work well with this part of the process along with a ladder. Generally try not to over-prune in one year, as this stimulates sucker growth and you are creating a higher maintenance tree than need be. My objective is to preserve the tree and its health so that it can produce mast for many years, recognizing that this is a process, not a destination.

Source: www.weekendgardener.net



A - Suckers
B - Stubs or broken branches
C - Downward growing branches
D - Rubbing branches
E - Upward growing interior branches
F - Competing leaders
G - Narrow crotches
H - Whorls

General Fruit Tree Pruning Instructions

1. Always use sharp shears or saws so your cuts are clean. Use pruning shears on young trees and limbs less than 1/2 inch diameter, and lopping shears for your bigger cuts. For mature fruit trees, use a pruning saw.
2. Begin by removing dead wood and broken branches. Then cut out any wood that crosses or rubs against any other branches. This opens up the middle so the sun can get to all the fruit.
3. Make your cut close to a bud, to a joint in the branch, or to the trunk; never leave a stub. The pruning cut should be just above a bud. Make the cut at a backwards angle of about 30 degrees.
4. Prune stems just above a pair of opposing strong shoots or buds. If shoots or buds are staggered, choose a strong one and prune just above it.
5. Keep more horizontal branches, and prune more vertical branches.
6. Remove suckers (shoots) from around the base of the tree.
7. Get rid of all debris which can harbor pests and disease.

Source: www.lawn-and-gardening-tips.com

Andy Zepp

The Finger Lakes Land Trust is a membership-supported, not-for-profit land conservation organization dedicated to protecting the lands that define the character of the Finger Lakes region. Since its founding in 1989, the Land Trust has protected over 15,000 acres of the area's forests, farms, lakeshore, and gorges.

Afoot in the Field *is a newsletter provided by the Land Trust for landowners in the Finger Lakes who own properties that are permanently protected with a conservation easement, or who are otherwise committed to, or interested in, land conservation and wildlife habitat protection and improvement. For more information about the Finger Lakes Land Trust and its conservation programs visit www.fllt.org or call our Ithaca office at 607-275-9487.*

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