



# The Land Steward

NEWSLETTER OF THE FINGER LAKES LAND TRUST

## Land Trust Completes Largest Project to Date within Skaneateles Lake Watershed

*Bill and Jeri Jackson love their organic hay farm situated on the east side of Skaneateles Lake in the town of Spafford, Onondaga County. Now, after granting three conservation easements protecting 690 acres to the Finger Lakes Land Trust, they look out at acres upon acres of conserved farmland from their Airstream trailer which overlooks Skaneateles Lake.*

Like many farms, their land—known as the Jackson-Noel Farm—features several significant natural resources including 300 acres of woodland, 8,500 feet of streambank, and nearly two miles of scenic frontage on State Route 41. The three easements will protect these resources, in addition to over 380 acres of farmland. Streamside buffer zones will help ensure water quality downstream in Skaneateles Lake—the unfiltered drinking water supply for 200,000 people, including the city of Syracuse.

After meeting local farmer Bill Burns in 2016, the Jackson family purchased the property over a multi-year span, concluding in 2022. The Jackson-Noel

Farm now grows high-quality organic hay sold locally and in the state of Virginia where they own Tri-County Feeds, an equestrian-related general store established in 1980.

In addition to placing easements on their land, Bill and Jeri also worked with the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets (NYSDAM) to reduce erosion and runoff through a climate-resilient farming grant.

Two of the three conservation easements on the Jackson-Noel Farm were funded by a Farmland Protection Implementation Grant from NYSDAM. Additional funding came from contributions to the Land Trust's *Finger Lakes Forever* capital

campaign.

"We're very grateful to Bill and Jeri Jackson for conserving their farm," said Land Trust Director of Conservation Max Heitner. "It is a beautiful property and we couldn't be happier to secure it for continued agricultural use and water quality protection in the Skaneateles Lake watershed."

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements that permanently limit future land use in order to protect the land's conservation value. Lands subject to conservation easements remain in private ownership, on local tax rolls,

*continued on page 2*



*Without philanthropy, the Finger Lakes Land Trust's land and water conservation efforts would simply not be possible. All of us at the Land Trust are grateful for the support of our members and this year we are particularly grateful for the anonymous family who pledged up to \$100,000 for a matching gift challenge.*

**T**hanks to their generosity, any increase over your 2022 giving will be matched dollar for dollar, and all new members will have their gifts doubled.

Challenges like this encourage the Land Trust to raise its sights and pursue additional conservation opportunities in the face of ever-increasing development pressures. By leveraging this challenge, our members ensure that we can act quickly to secure those parcels that are vital to the integrity of our region. Your support also enables us to form valuable partnerships with like-minded organizations to increase our impact.

To date, the Land Trust has protected over 30,000 acres in the region which includes a network of over 45 nature preserves that are open to the public and 179 conservation easements that limit development on properties that remain in private ownership. As we continue to add to this portfolio of conserved lands, the Land Trust is also focused on the threat of toxic algae. In addition to protecting wetlands and undeveloped shorelines—both important for maintaining water quality—we are also working with partners to restore our streams and wetlands, and to limit nutrient runoff to our lakes.

Every accomplishment of the Land Trust is in large part due to the generous contributions of our supporters. To see the impact of this support, visit



*The Roy H. Park Preserve in Tompkins County*

one of our nature preserves and enjoy the diversity of wildlife that find homes there. As we look to the future, we are excited by what we have accomplished thus far and inspired by your support to redouble our efforts.

Thank you for your steadfast support of conservation in the Finger Lakes!

Andrew Zepp  
Executive Director



## Land Trust Completes Largest Project to Date within Skaneateles Lake Watershed *continued from cover*

and available for traditional uses such as farming and hunting.

These latest conservation easements connect to a growing complex of conserved land within the Skaneateles Highlands. The farm is adjacent to the Land Trust's Hinchcliff Family Preserve, one of the organization's most beloved and well-visited nature preserves which

connects to the Land Trust's High Vista Nature Preserve to the south. It is also located in close proximity to the Staghorn Cliffs—a striking feature on the east side of Skaneateles Lake, where the Land Trust has conserved nearly 2,000 feet of shoreline.

Additional conserved lands in this area include two state forests and approximately one dozen tracts of

farmland protected with conservation easements granted to the Finger Lakes Land Trust, the New York Agricultural Land Trust, and Cortland County.

With the completion of this latest project, the Land Trust has now conserved more than 2,945 acres within the Skaneateles Lake watershed.

—Max Heitner

# Additional Land Conserved at Bell Station

**I**N May 2022, the Land Trust acquired a 500-acre property in the town of Lansing known as Bell Station, which features 3,400 feet of undeveloped shoreline along Cayuga Lake. It was previously owned by New York State Electric & Gas (NYSEG), which planned to build a nuclear power plant on the site. That project never materialized, and thanks to a tremendous outpouring of community support, the Land Trust was able to purchase the property from NYSEG for conservation, not development.

Building on that success, the Land Trust recently expanded the conserved land in the area by acquiring a 110-acre property adjacent to Bell Station. The parcel was formerly the site of the nine-hole Cedar View Golf Course, which was operated by the Larsen family for more than 50 years until it ceased operations a couple of years ago.

The Cedar View parcel, which was originally part of a dairy farm, was owned by Marty Larsen and her brother Wayne. Both of them were born on the property when it was still a farm. After the pasture land was converted into a golf course by their father Earl in 1965, Marty played an increasingly prominent role in the family-owned course's operations, eventually taking over sole management. However, a combination of factors led her to shutter the course in 2021.

In the two years since then, the once-open fairways have become meadowlands that offer scenic views of Cayuga Lake. The meadows have recently been the site of nesting Bobolinks, and other songbirds like the Savannah Sparrow and Eastern Meadowlark may also find the habitat is suitable for nesting. In partnership with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Land Trust plans to remove selected trees from the meadows to expand the grassland habitat for these bird species. Ongoing maintenance, such as periodic mowing of the meadows, will also be part of the management plan.

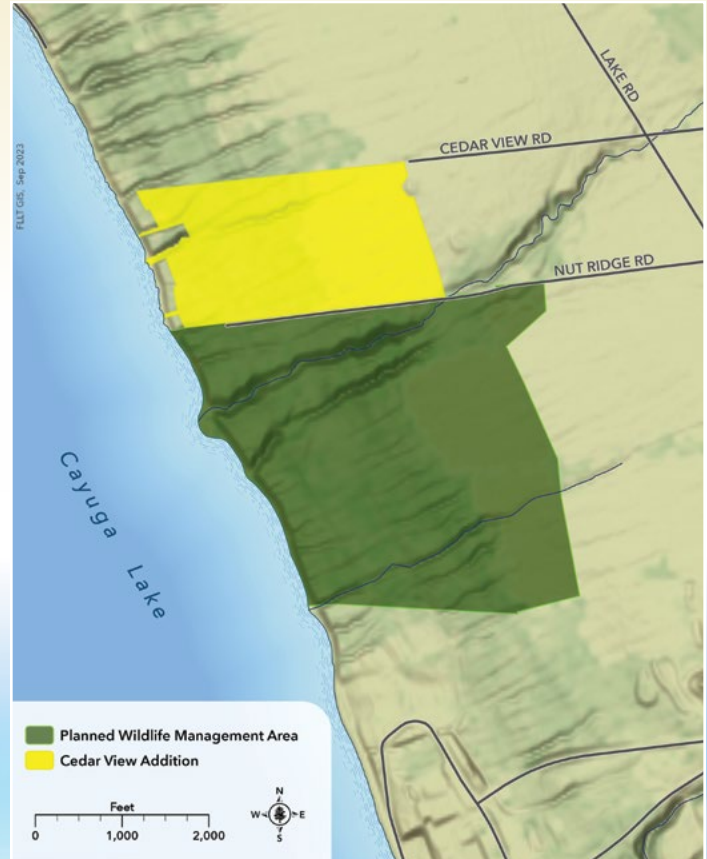
The rest of the parcel consists of mature lakeshore woodlands that include several seasonal tributaries that empty into the lake.

The acquisition of this property was a cooperative effort with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). When funds become available, the

DEC will purchase the parcel, along with the lakeshore portion of Bell Station, to form a new public wildlife management area. The combined properties will comprise more than 400 acres of diverse wildlife habitat. Additionally, a portion of the Bell Station property will be dedicated to solar energy production in accordance with interest expressed by the Town of Lansing.

In the meantime, the Bell Station property is currently open for hiking and shoreline access. The Cedar View parcel will also be open to the public once the habitat improvements are completed.

—Jeff Tonole



*Cedar View property in the foreground with Bell Station property to the south*

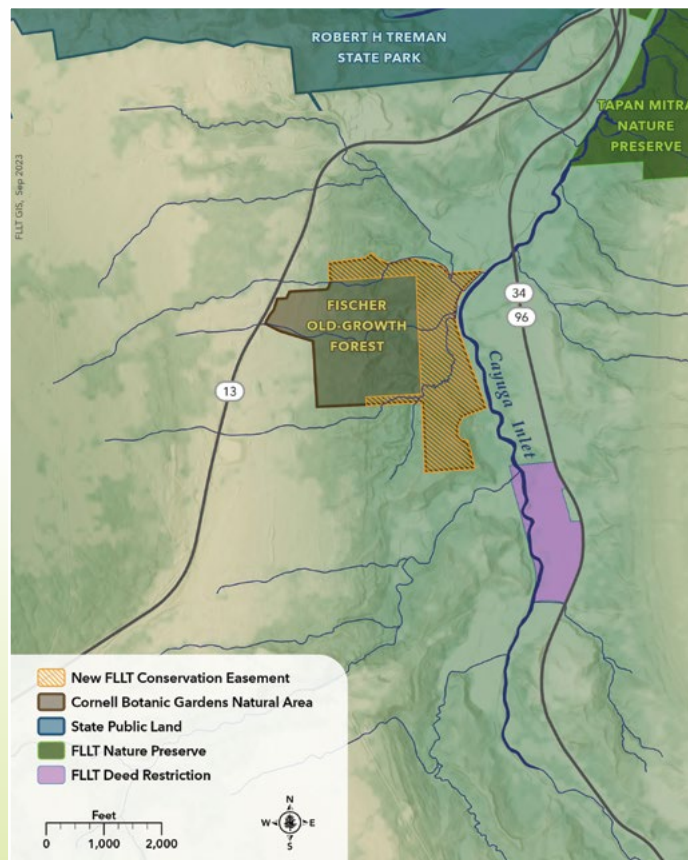
BILL HECHT

# Partnership with Cornell University Buffers Old-Growth Forest in Tompkins County

*Managed by Cornell Botanic Gardens, the Fischer Old-Growth Forest Natural Area is a 180-acre natural area in Newfield, New York, tucked into an inconspicuous glen between West Danby Road and Elmira Road (Route 13).*

The surrounding forest is far less established as it was cleared for agriculture or timber production over the last two hundred years. The steep slopes and difficult terrain around the Fischer Old-Growth Forest protected a diverse slice of forest. Today it is a magnificent place to take a step back in time.

In September of 2023, a unique partnership between the Finger Lakes Land Trust, Cornell Botanic Gardens, and Tompkins County resulted in the addition of 81 acres of wetlands and mixed hardwood forest to the natural area. The addition expands the Fischer Old-Growth Forest Natural Area to the north and east, providing more diverse habitat and a buffer between the existing forest and future development. Protection of the property also safeguards



sensitive wetlands which filter runoff to the adjacent Cayuga Inlet.

Funding for closing, administrative, and initial stewardship costs was provided by the Tompkins County Natural Infrastructure Capital Grant Program. However, the program required Cornell Botanic Gardens to legally protect the property from being subdivided or used for non-conservation purposes. The Land Trust agreed to hold a conservation easement for Cornell to satisfy the Natural Infrastructure grant requirement.

Todd Bittner, Director of Natural Areas for the Cornell Botanic Gardens, reflected on the collaboration shortly after the land was transferred to Cornell University. "Land conservation rarely happens without strong partnerships.

*continued on page 8*

# Meadow Restoration Efforts Improve Wildlife Habitat

*Over one hundred years ago, the hills and valleys of the Finger Lakes region were far more open than today, with extensive meadows that provided habitat for Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks, and a variety of invertebrates, including the monarch butterfly.*

Over time, reforestation and the rise of more intensive agricultural practices limited the amount of habitat for species that depend on grasslands and shrublands. As a result, wildlife species that depend on these areas are experiencing steep declines. For example, it is believed that Eastern Meadowlark populations declined by 77% between 1970 and 2014.

To reverse this alarming trend, the Land Trust is working with partners to maintain and restore meadows on nature preserves that once hosted agricultural operations. Today, the organization is managing 600 acres of meadow at 20 different sites. In addition to the valuable habitat these areas provide, many also feature some of the scenic vistas for which the Finger Lakes region is well known.

In some cases, the Land Trust is able to utilize farmers who are willing to harvest late-season hay after resident birds have completed their nesting cycle. At other preserves, a combination of volunteers, staff, contractors, and a partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) keeps the meadows from being overtaken by non-native, invasive shrubs. Recent progress includes invasive species removal from meadows at the Canandaigua Vista, Lindsay-Parsons, and Owasco Bluffs nature preserves.

These efforts have also extended to lands acquired in partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). At the recent Cedar View acquisition overlooking Cayuga Lake (see page 3), a grant

from the USFWS is supporting the expansion of grasslands that hosted nesting Bobolinks this year. In the future, these areas will be periodically maintained by DEC staff.

Looking to the future, the Land Trust will continue developing new partnerships and additional staff capacity to maintain meadow habitat so all of us can experience the joy of observing the birds, butterflies, and wildflowers that benefit from these efforts.



*A U.S. Fish & Wildlife tractor in the southernmost field of the Land Trust's Lindsay Parsons Biodiversity Preserve in Tompkins County*

ANDY ZEPP



*The Finger Lakes Land Trust partnered with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to restore 65 acres of grassland at the West River Preserve at the south end of Canandaigua Lake*

ANGEL KENT



# SCENES

from Around  
Our Region...

*FLLT Land Steward Eric Mastroberti taking in the view at the Canandaigua Vista Preserve in Canandaigua, Ontario County*

JASON GORMAN

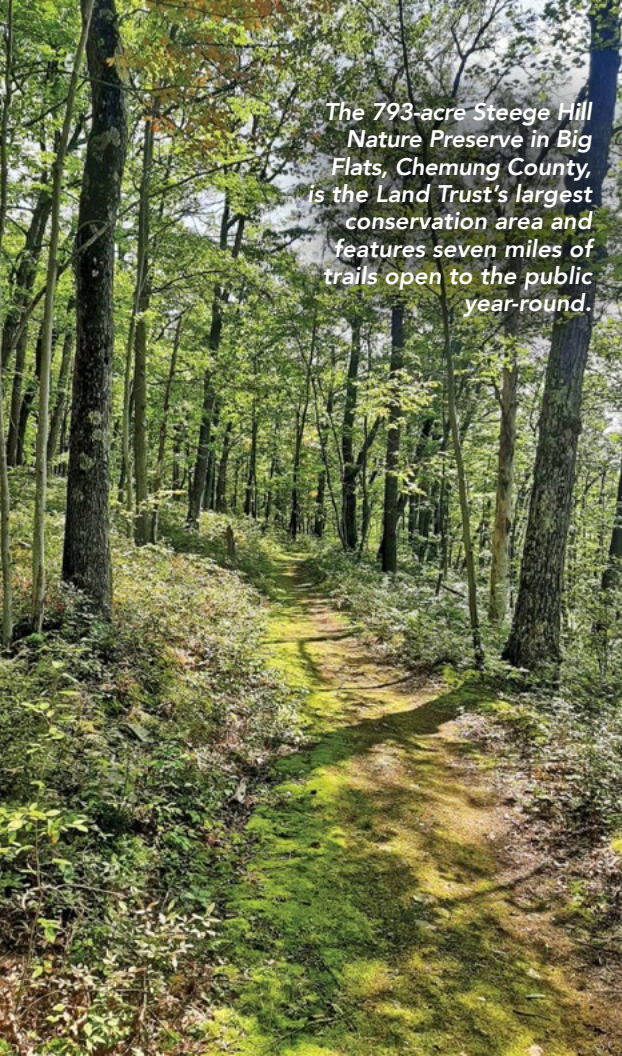
JASON GORMAN



*Volunteers have been busy building trails and preparing the new Sims-Jennings Preserve at Cayuga Cliffs for public access in Lansing, Tompkins County. Plans are underway for an opening in spring 2024—stay tuned!*

CHRIS RAY

CHRIS RAY



*The 793-acre Steege Hill Nature Preserve in Big Flats, Chemung County, is the Land Trust's largest conservation area and features seven miles of trails open to the public year-round.*



GARY BROWNELL

*Wetlands at the Dorothy McIlroy Bird Sanctuary in Summerhill, Cayuga County*



*Goldenrod and asters high above the eastern shore of Skaneateles Lake near the Land Trust's Hinchcliff Family Preserve in Spafford, Onondaga County*

# Longtime Land Trust Member DONATES LAND TO SUPPORT Conservation and Education

*Carman and Sandy Hill made their first contribution to the Land Trust in 1995, eleven years after purchasing their property on Wilkins Road in the town of Ulysses, Tompkins County. For twenty-seven years they devoted themselves to life in this idyllic rural setting, living in an 1840 Greek Revival farmhouse, raising children, tending their vegetable and herb gardens, and working cooperatively with their neighbors—all while managing their careers.*

Eventually, their home became a gathering place for their adult children and grandchildren. Sandy has fond memories of a rustic outbuilding on the property, surrounded by trees and black raspberry bushes, where their grandchildren played and where she and Carman would go to relax.

A World War II veteran, Carman was also a member of the Ithaca Rotary Club, served on the Ithaca City Board of Education, and, among many other contributions, donated produce from his own garden to local soup kitchen Loaves and Fishes. They both believed strongly in the value of education and worked diligently to improve life in their community.

After Carman passed away in 2017, Sandy searched for a way to honor his life, ultimately deciding

to donate the undeveloped 73-acre portion of their property to the Land Trust. Her decision was made with respect to the environment and with the understanding that the land would be sold to a private buyer subject to a conservation easement. Most of the proceeds from the sale will be used to create the Carman B. Hill Fund which the Land Trust will use to support paid internships that will provide hands-on experiences in land and water conservation.

"My donation has been made to protect farmland from development and keep Cayuga Lake clean," Sandy said. "Climate change is having a devastating effect so we all should make an effort to protect our land. Also, I wanted to honor my late husband Carman Hill who carefully cared for this beautiful farmland and

wood lot."

The donated property features scenic farmland and a mature stand of sugar maples bordering a tributary to Cayuga Lake. The conservation easement will limit development to a single home, allows for continued agricultural use, and provides for a buffer of natural vegetation along a small stream that runs through the property, a mix of fields and woodland.

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## Partnership with Cornell University Buffers Old-Growth Forest in Tompkins County *continued from page 4*

We are fortunate to have committed conservation partners who are willing to find novel solutions that ensure our collective natural heritage is conserved."

With funds from the Tompkins County grant, Cornell will also make a donation to the Land Trust's stewardship endowment fund which supports the organization in its legal obligation to inspect properties and enforce the terms of the conservation easements. In this way, the Cornell

Botanic Gardens and Finger Lakes Land Trust will continue to be partners in conservation.

—Kate Riley

*The Land Trust gratefully acknowledges attorney Peter Miller for providing pro bono legal services in support of this project.*



# Tax Planning and Giving to the Finger Lakes Land Trust

**M**any people take advantage of tax-smart ways to give money to non-profit organizations like the Finger Lakes Land Trust. These strategies became more important after recent tax law changes significantly expanded the standard deduction. The result is many taxpayers find their itemized deductions are lower than the standard deduction, thus eliminating the tax incentive for charitable giving. Despite the changes, two tax-advantaged options may still provide advantages for your charitable gifts.

## Qualified Charitable Distribution

Are you 70 ½ years old, or older, with a balance in your IRA or other retirement plan? You may be eligible for a Qualified Charitable Distribution, or QCD. The Internal Revenue Service allows those taxpayers to transfer up to \$100,000 to charities tax-free each year. This is a great way to give to non-profit organizations, and for those who are at least 73, QCDs count toward the IRA owner's required minimum distribution (RMD) for that tax year.

Normally, distributions from a traditional individual retirement arrangement (IRA) are taxable when received. With a QCD, however, these distributions become tax-free if they're paid directly from the IRA to an eligible charitable organization. Gifting pre-tax dollars means you don't pay income tax on those distributions. If you are required to make minimum distributions from your IRA each year (age 73 or older), and you also give money to charity each year, why not save yourself some income taxes and use a QCD?

The Finger Lakes Land Trust is eligible to receive your

QCD. Simply work with your IRA trustee to help you process your contribution using pre-tax dollars. The QCD option is available regardless of whether an eligible IRA owner itemizes deductions or uses the standard deduction. (Transferred amounts are not taxable to the donor, so no deduction is available for the transfer.)

## Gift of Appreciated Securities

Do you have shares of stock or a mutual fund that have appreciated since you bought them? If so, you can make a gift of those shares to charity and avoid capital gains tax on the shares gifted. For example, you can direct your financial institution to transfer shares directly to the Land Trust. When the organization sells the shares, as a non-profit they pay no capital gains taxes. Because you did not sell the shares, you pay no tax on the appreciation. The gains are essentially eliminated from taxation.

By avoiding capital gain taxation (up to 20%) if you sell the shares, you may find this form of gifting more tax-efficient than simply writing a check. If you also itemize your deductions, rather than use the standard deduction you could get additional tax savings for the charitable gift.

With tax law constantly changing, it's nice to know there are still some options to make charitable gifts using tax-efficient strategies. Consult with your tax adviser to be sure these options are appropriate for your situation. And thank you for your continued support of the Finger Lakes Land Trust!

—Wade Sarkis, FLLT Board Member

## Double Your Impact... with Our \$100,000 Matching Gift Challenge

Each year, your support of our conservation work helps us save new lands and waters across the region. Thank you! This year, your support can make an even bigger impact. An anonymous family will match any increase over your 2022 giving dollar for dollar, up to \$100,000. Not a member yet?

**ALL NEW GIFTS WILL BE MATCHED 1:1.**

Please consider a special gift today at [fllt.org/give](https://fllt.org/give) so that we can protect more land and water in the beautiful Finger Lakes region!

## Our appreciation for gifts in honor of

**Betsy Darlington and Jason Gorman**  
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Michael Linse

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**Bob Werner**  
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# A CLOSER LOOK

## Elder: Tree of Paradoxes

**Sambocade:** Take and make a crust in a dish and take curds and wring out the whey and draw them through a strainer and put in the crust. Add a third part of sugar and some egg whites and shake in elderflowers and bake it up with rose water and serve it up.

**SO** reads a recipe, written in 1390, for an elderflower cheese tart. (It is apparently delicious: see <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2020/09/great-medieval-bake-off.html>). A Renaissance recipe for elderflower fritters sounds interesting, though a Roman elderberry custard might not please modern tastes. All of these dishes were made with the blossoms and fruit of *Sambucus nigra* ssp. *nigra*, the European elder, which grows abundantly on that continent. When Europeans came to North America, many trees were foreign to them, but they recognized *S. nigra* ssp. *canadensis*, the American black elder, which is shrubbier but otherwise very similar to the European species. (Neither should be confused with box elder, an unrelated tree whose pinnately compound leaves resemble those of the elder.) Early colonists made American elderberries into wine and cough syrup.

Although these dainty dishes mostly graced aristocratic tables, do not assume that the elder is a frivolous tree. It was sacred to pre-Christian Europeans and more recently was associated with beings of great power, generally feminine, who were helpful if honored, dangerous if disrespected. But why would it have such authority? Neither *S. nigra* nor *canadensis* grows much taller than twenty feet or lives much longer than a half-century; their small trunks do not provide wood that is either particularly beautiful or useful. (The word “elder” has nothing to do with age, but seems to be related to the Anglo-Saxon word for “fire.” The small branches, cleared of pith, can be used to make bellows, or indeed anything that uses a hollow tube; the genus name, *Sambucus*, comes from a Greek word for “flute.” It is notable that the tree has never been named for its showy clusters of blossoms or berries, but always for the hollowness of its stems.) Paints and dyes can be made from the elder, but it is hardly unique: many other forest plants can be used in the same way.

If the oak was revered because it was the giant of the European old-growth forest, then the elder may have been deified for precisely the opposite reason. It grows and dies within the lifespan of a human being, recovers quickly when browsed or cut back, and spreads quickly by suckering. Because it is immune to lightning strikes (likely because it is short) and grows in disturbed areas,

it was considered to be protective and planted around households and farms. Branches, placed around doors and windows, kept out witches and thieves. Elder leaves do indeed ward off flies, if not necessarily evil spirits, since they smell like (some would say) cat urine and contain a natural insect repellent.

The tiny, creamy-white blossoms, on the other hand, are as fragrant as the leaves are pungent. Their sweet yellow-green scent, designed to attract a range of pollinators, can be used for cooking, teas, perfumes, and cosmetics, or to make a delicate wine. According to some reports, this wine was consumed in ancient ritual contexts in order to invoke clairvoyance. This is probably not just legend: although the blossoms are apparently safe for consumption, the leaves, stems, roots, seeds, and unripe fruit contain a healthy amount of cyanide, which, in excessive quantities, can induce seizures and hallucinations, among other symptoms. (Fans of historical recipes need not worry: cyanide is deactivated by heating or fermentation.)

Nevertheless, many birds and mammals eat the berries and browse the foliage with apparently no ill effect.

The elder produces chemicals, including cyanide, to deter various insects and parasites. Many of these compounds also have medicinal uses. The tree thus contains not only poisons and insecticides but a veritable pharmacopeia of remedies, including purgatives, analgesics, antipyretics, laxatives, and antidiarrheals.

If you happen to see black-purple elderberries among scarlet and honey leaves—the elder is quite beautiful in autumn—you might ask for the protection of this contradictory forest spirit, close cousin to a European dryad: tree of paradoxes, of vengeance and protection, poison and medicine, death and rebirth.

—Jacqueline Stuhmiller



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## New Ithaca Bakery Bread Cards Available



**ITHACA BAKERY** is generously offering bread cards to all current Land Trust members again this year. The bread card entitles members to one FREE loaf of bread per month with a \$5 minimum purchase at the 400 N. Meadow Street and Triphammer Marketplace locations. Please visit the Land Trust's main office at 202 E. Court Street in Ithaca if you would like to pick up your bread card.