

Thurston Nature Center Oak Savanna

An Oak Savannah is coming to our neighborhood! The Thurston Nature Center Committee (TNCC) will purchase and plant four healthy, high quality trees of each of four species of native Michigan oaks—Bur Oak, Chinkapin Oak, Swamp White Oak, and White Oak, 16 trees in all. The oaks will be planted this spring in the northeastern corner of the Thurston playground, just south of where Yorktown dead-ends.

Last fall, the TNCC, applied for a grant from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to purchase 16 oak trees that would become the beginnings of a one-acre-sized Oak Savanna. The group was delighted to receive authorization for reimbursement for \$2000 to purchase balled and burlapped trees. The \$2000 will be matched by its equivalent in time volunteered by TNCC members, Thurston parents and others from our community as well as (hopefully) by financial contributions from various sources.

Between 4000 and 6000 years ago, long before Europeans settled here, oak savannas (also called oak openings) were quite common around what is now Ann Arbor. When the earliest land surveyors first explored our area in the early 1800s, they noted seeing many of these oak savannas. Like prairies, oak savannas are a fire-dependent habitat type in an area with limited rainfall, but the rolling grassland of the savanna is scattered with isolated trees. The trees are primarily large, old oaks, and there is between 10 and 60% canopy, with or without a shrubby layer below. The predominantly grass-covered ground layer is composed of species associated with both prairie and forest communities. Sadly, oak savannas were virtually eliminated in Michigan long ago.

To learn more about the significance of these interesting ecological communities and the plants and animals that lived in them, as well as their significance to native peoples, click on the heading "Oak Openings" at the following Michigan Natural Features Inventory website:

<http://web4.msue.msu.edu/mnfi/pub/abstracts.cfm#Communities>

The Thurston Oak Savanna will be a long-term, ambitious and complex urban forestry project . Its full development, including the planting of native shrubs, grasses and other wildflowers normally associated with such habitats, will take some years to complete. Meanwhile, we hope to plant our 16 oaks in late March or April 2009.

If you would be willing to volunteer to help, please contact Neal Foster (663-0756). To learn more about the Thurston Nature Center, please visit our website at <<http://thurstonnaturecenter.org/>>. Colin Brooks is doing a great job as our new webmaster.