

Making the Most of the Worst

“Good work finds the way between pride and despair.” Wendell Berry

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It’s been a tough year; and for some much worse than others. Many of us looked to our landscapes for calm, focus, beauty, a place to work off nervous energy and a sense of normalcy.

Like our landscapes, we strived toward resiliency. In trying to make the most of the worst, here’s a little list of what we’ll call “landscape lemons and silver linings.”

- The care of the arboretum in Stella is handled by volunteers ranging in age from 60-85, but “with the garden open 24/7, people could come and go as they wished without fear of violating social distancing guidelines,” said Stella Garden Club secretary Vicki Beilke. And with more people than ever choosing to plant home gardens this year, and more people having time to pot up sale plants, both their plant sale offerings and their income from sales were higher than normal. In short, Beilke said, “we didn’t miss a lick.”
- Birds. We didn’t have to social distance from them so we watched them, identified them, fed them, kept their bird baths full, photographed them. Many of us are also planning to attract even more by adding native and multi-season plants that offer better habitat.
- Beautiful furniture, flooring and shelters have been made from the ash trees lost to Emerald Ash Borer over the last few years. And many of the private and public landscapes containing a preponderance of ash trees have been planted much more diversely thanks to this dire warning of what happens when a dominant species is endangered.
- When a flood left most of the Gilman Park Arboretum in Pierce underwater for six days in 2010, curator Gary Zimmer said, “Fortunately I had learned from other natural events to simply leave it alone for awhile. The worst thing to do is to give up or start ripping things out. Almost immediately I saw that this could be a great learning experience; that I could document what happened to help myself—and others—in future planning and planting.” And so he did, letting quaking aspen seedlings take over a perennial bed that had turned into a weed patch, “It was a poor site for a perennial garden anyway and the aspen colony is an arboretum favorite for many people now.” Many of us have made similar changes in the face of loss.
- Several years ago, with eastern redcedar taking over the Cedar Point Biological Station, UNL staff and students built a cabin from the reclaimed wood. “We wanted to find a way to use this tree that many people find to be a nuisance,” said Griffiths. They even managed to win a 2019 Architectural Education Award from the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture.



While covid made us keep our distance this last year, the fires and flooding of previous years worked to bring together communities, and neighbors, that had previously had little reason to care for each other. With such severe weather extremes and other challenges, Nebraskans have gotten pretty good at making lemonade. We look forward to making more of it – together – in the years to come.

Karma Larsen, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, plantnebraska.org

CUTLINE: Volunteers at the Stella Arboretum potted up plants for sales to help pay expenses like water pumps for ponds, heating the greenhouse and other needs. The garden was originally planted in 2000 by and for the school; when the school was closed for consolidation in 2009, the community came together to keep the garden and the greenhouse going.