

# Martins leave long legacy of land restoration

By Anna Marie Lux

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TOWN OF MILTON—Big bluestem and Indian grass blow peacefully in the winter wind outside the home of Ron and Marti Martin.

The town of Milton couple planted their flourishing prairie the day before Christmas 2003 on Charley Bluff Road.

They later built their home on the almost six-acre spot.

For the Martins, no landscape is complete without the ever-changing color and character of native grasses and other plants.

Many people know Ron and Marti as the owners of Midwest Prairies. Now they are entering a new chapter.

Earlier this fall, they retired and sold the business to Carl Korfmacher, who shares their passion for healing the land.

But the Martins leave a lasting legacy.

They started the business in 1993, when native prairie-restoration companies were few. For more than two decades, they worked with area landowners to restore thousands of acres into prairies and wildlife habitat.

Their business had a humble start.

When Ron got laid off as an electrician at a canning plant, he needed to find new work. Through his sons Roger and John, he met Al Haller, a naturalist who lived on the shores of Lake Koshkonong.

Haller connected Ron with his daughter and son-in-law, Penny and Gary Shackelford, who had just bought 380 acres in the town of Milton.

The Shackelfords were looking for someone to tackle the labor-intensive job of killing invasive buckthorn, which was shading out oak seedlings in a 130-acre woods.

“Ron said he would work for us,” Penny recalls. “From the moment he started, he was a cut above. He had a background as a farmer, so he knew how to run the equipment, and he kept meticulous records.”

Ron learned on the job.

“I was building the bicycle while riding it,” he explains. “I was learning how nature works.”

Ron invested in equipment, took a class at The Nature Conservancy to pick up skills for prescribed burning and volunteered with the state Department of Natural Resources to get more experience. Excited about working outdoors, he learned more skills for restoring natural plant communities every day.

Marti—only a few credits short of a business degree—set up a database of flowers and grasses to help Ron

design seed mixes. She took over the bookkeeping and office work.

Soon other landowners came to them for help. The Martins eagerly showed them how to live softer on the planet without giving up anything but their lawn mowers.

Ron planted a tall grass prairie for Larry Scheunemann of Whitewater in 1998.

“He did a really good job,” Larry said. “Through the years, we have done burns and cuttings to keep it in good shape.”

Most people want to do the right thing for their land, Ron said.

“But they don't know where to begin, or they have misconceptions about land and wildlife management,” he explained. “All they need is help to get started.”

Ron and Marti say that selling Midwest Prairies is bittersweet.

“Many of our clients have become dear friends,” Ron said.

Eventually, they hope to move to Colorado. They also plan to volunteer in state and national parks.

But they will not forget the prairies they nurtured in Wisconsin.

“Prairies are a lot like children,” Ron said. “They develop a character of their own influenced by the surrounding environment... I want to come back and visit them all to see how they grow up.”

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