

The power of a flower

Milton couples honored for work to save rare orchid

ANNA MARIE LUX

BETWEEN THE LINES

TOWN OF MILTON

Penny and Gary Shackelford discovered a rare orchid on their property north of Milton in the mid-1990s.

Their neighbor John “Jock” Van Altena came to see the statethreatened plant with white lacey blooms and a sweet nocturnal scent.

Suddenly, John excused himself . “I had seen this plant before,” he explained. He drove home, where he found a dozen or so blooming on his nearby pasture. Until that day, he didn’t know what they were. Today, the Shackelfords, Connie Brouillette and John have a friendly competition to see who has more of the tall plant that blooms in late June and early July. “They always have more than we do,” Gary said.

In a peak year, the Shackelfords counted 200 plants on their land, while John and Connie had more than 800 on theirs.

For almost 20 years, the couples have worked to preserve and enhance populations of the struggling orchid, which is in danger of going extinct nationally. They have marked and watched single plants to learn their life histories . They have reduced negative impacts by invasive plants and deer.

In general, wild orchids cannot be transplanted.

But John, a retired teacher, pioneered meticulous methods to move individual plants to begin new populations. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service used his method to help other private landowners increase their orchid numbers.

John’s father was a student of renowned naturalist Aldo Leopold in the early 1940s. Like his dad, he notices and learns from nature’s details.

Earlier this month, the friends of the UW-Madison Arboretum and the Aldo Leopold Foundation honored the neighbors with an Aldo Leopold restoration award. They received it for their rare effort on behalf of a rare plant.

Erin Crain wrote a letter supporting them for the Henry C. Greene Award. She is director of the Wisconsin DNR Bureau of Natural Heritage Conservation.

“Gary, Penny, John and Connie are unique in their commitment to managing habitats that support the rare species they monitor,” Crain said. “Their years of work restoring wetlands have resulted in one of the largest populations of eastern prairie fringed orchid in the state.”

Penny and Gary donated a conservation easement to the state DNR in 2004. Called Fair Meadows State Natural Area, the privately held preserve of almost

300 acres contains a mixture of restored and planted prairies, oak woodlands and a large wetland.

In 2013, 62 acres of John and Connie's property became a privately owned state natural area with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Koshkonong Corners State Natural Area also has a diversity of natural communities.

Because of the varied habitats, both areas contain a large number of plants and animals and 176 bird species. In addition to the rare orchid, the properties cradle other state-threatened species, including purple milkweed and ospreys.

The couples credit several agencies for their restoration success. Among them are the state DNR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Madison Audubon Society, Natural Resources Conservation Service, The Prairie Enthusiasts and state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection.

The fringed orchid can produce flower stalks 47 inches tall. Each stalk can have 40 white flowers, each about an inch long.

Flowers become fragrant at night to attract hawk moths. The big moths feed on nectar and transfer pollen from flower to flower and plant to plant.

Whether a seed from the orchid sprouts and grows depends on a symbiotic relationship between the plant's root system and fungi in the soil.

Work with the rare orchid is fueled by thoughts of the next generation, Connie said.

"We want to make sure our grandchildren have a place to experience this beautiful world," Connie said. "This is our heritage to them."

Penny added:

"We can all take part in restoring and preserving natural communities, even in a corner of our backyard. A small shrubby area, a cluster of milkweeds or native trees like oaks or cherries or hickories will provide a home and food for birds and butterflies, bees and deer. This will enrich our lives and be a source of fascination and pleasure for our children."

Anna Marie Lux is a columnist for The Gazette. Her columns run Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Call her with ideas or comments at 608-755-8264, or email amarielux@gazettextra.com .



Gary Shackelford

An eastern prairie fringed orchid blooms north of Milton. Gary Shackelford, his wife Penny, and neighbors John Van Altena and Connie Brouillette recently received an award from the UWMadison Arboretum for their efforts to preserve and enhance populations of the state-threatened plant.





From left, John Van Altena, Connie Brouillette and Penny and Gary Shackelford received the 2014 Henry C. Greene Award from the UW-Madison Arboretum earlier this month. The northern Rock County residents got the award for their work to enhance and preserve the state-endangered eastern prairie fringed orchid.

Photo courtesy of Bill Arthur