

Causey's Mill: The Making of a Buffer Zone

By Ray Robinson

The Abernathy Gardens was established in 2006 by Susan Abernathy McCreary, the Huntington Garden Club, the city of Newport News, Mariners' Museum, and the Riverside Health System Foundation. Because of the historic nature of Causey's Mill, the city of Newport News saw fit to restore this area and the mill to further enhance the educational importance and beautification of Newport News. In the fall of 2012, the supervisor of Parks and Rec., Douglas Kennedy, and Mary Wright, a Newport News Master Gardener Water Steward, thought that it would be even better if we planted a buffer zone on Lake Maury here at Causey's Mill. That would accomplish 3 main purposes:

- Help prevent contaminated run-off into the lake, one of our watersheds to the James River and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay.
- Provide a project for the Newport News MG Water Stewards.
- Add further beautification to the city.

Here were a few of the hurdles:

- What plants could we plant that would help the area?
- Where would the funds come from?
- Who would do the work and how?
- What approvals would have to be met?



After mill was moved



Area to be renovated

After weeks of research, we knew we had to use mainly native plants. We found that we had to submit not only our project to the city for approval but also to VCE (Virginia Cooperative Extension) for approval. These approvals took months! Plants were approved and some were dismissed. Alternative plants were substituted.



Another view

Again, this project's main purpose was to create a buffer zone along Maury's Lake. Another goal was to provide education as to the meaning and development of a buffer zone. Also, we needed help to complete the project. Maybe we can accomplish 2 things at once. How about recruiting kids to help with the work and teaching them at the same time? Well, we had dealt with Booker T. Washington Middle School before in the past, why not again? After talking to Mrs. Deborah Fields, the principal, and her staff, they were more than willing to help. So we met

with the kids who volunteered to help and gave them a lesson on the importance of buffer zones. We also discussed safety issues with them that may be encountered at the site. They had many questions and seemed excited.

On September 11th, we met with the kids and school staff at Causey's Mill to clean out weeds and brush. What a fun day that was. NNPS TV was on site to film the event! The kids all pitched in and cut, pulled, dug, raked and chopped the site into a workable area. The video of them at work can be seen on YouTube and our website.

In the meantime, we were busy asking for donations from various groups and garden clubs to help purchase plants for the project. Keep in mind that we not only needed the plants but also needed to purchase materials such as gloves and tools. We truly appreciated the donations from the Denbigh Plantation Club, the James River Garden Club, and the James Landing Garden Club! Without their help, this project would have been truly difficult! After ordering and purchasing the plants, we had to keep them watered and cared for weeks at a time! This is especially true of those plants that needed to be kept moist until planting.

October 10th, planting day, arrived. It had rained and the site was very muddy. The kids took it all in stride. The area was all mapped out where the plants should go and we went to work. Again the NNPS TV was present and filmed us at work. After planting, we spread hay around and hoped for the best. Because of the number of workers at the site, we were done in about an hour and a half or less! Now it was time for Mother Nature to work Her "magic".

Winter came and left...and what a brutal this past winter was! After inspecting the site, we saw that we had lost only one variety of plant...which was the Fothergilla. We plan on putting in more hardy plants in its place. Further cleaning of the site was done since winter did not seem to stop the weeds from growing. We are also working with Parks and Rec on a possible maintenance schedule. Keep in mind that the site is designed to be self-sustaining...very little maintenance required. We just want it to be attractive, inviting and educational. We have plans to add signage to identify plants and also to explain the importance of a buffer zone. Our future plans are to expand the site to include more water front plantings.

Many "hands" played a part in the formulation of this project. Also, keep in mind that it will never be completed...just hopefully improved...similarly to our own "Grin and Grow" learning garden at Riverview Park. Our goal is to do our part in making Newport News a "jewel" among cities in our beautiful state of Virginia, and to demonstrate to others that we do care about our waterways, watersheds, history, environment, and the education of our youth. We want our next generation to help rebuild and preserve our unique heritage, and to realize the important role that they must play in order to not only maintain but to improve our environment. Understand that no matter how small a project we undertake it is a start. We are proud of the kids, and they should be encouraged to continue the productive path they follow and we also applaud those educators who are behind them.

We held a dedication ceremony on June 9th at Causey's Mill to present certificates of appreciation to the kids and staff of Booker T. Washington Middle School. We also presented certificates to Douglas Kennedy and Rudolph "Tip" Jones of Newport News Parks and Rec. Maintenance for their important parts in this project. It was an honor to see that Dr. Pat Woodbury of the city council and former Vice Mayor Madeline McMillan also attended the presentation. NNPS TV was also present to film the event.

Again, we, the Newport News Master Gardeners express our gratitude in being allowed to take on this project and include the youth of this city.