

The Old Explorer...

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There are “Little Things” that loom large in natural area restoration and maintenance, and are not at all, or poorly understood.

I consider myself an explorer, not an expert- in my mind, an expert is a blockhead-type thinker who does things the same way every year because someone else told him to! There are a lot of exciting things to be learned yet, in native restoration, that require *new* methods and *new* ideas based on intelligent observations and hands-on experience!

The first “Little Thing” I want to stress is that there are at least two distinct restoration types to be dealt with. The first type is what I wish to call “A Natural Area Restoration”, where there existed in the recent past (poor as it might have been), a natural wetland, woodland or prairie, and that the restorationist has a valid reason to expect a seed bank and/or plant bank to be still existing (sparse as it may be)! Here we must postpone planting seeds or plants from other areas until good burn management proves or disproves any hopes for an existing plant or seed bank! Simple burn management can lead to near complete restoration of neglected natural areas! To this end, our firm is working with the Illinois Department of Transportation on several degraded prairies and wetlands along roadsides. We intend to reclaim the diversity and richness of species once held on these “remnants” by exploiting the existing seed and plant bank with plain simple burn management. Our recent experiences have proven the seed and plant banks can be re-established by recognizing the ability of heat and moisture *together*, applied at the same time, will germinate long dormant seed and restart miniscule little plants, long buried, but still alive in the duff!

It is the effect of fire, not the fire itself, that creates heat. Fire blackens the soil and opens it up to the heat of the sun, allowing high soil temperatures and high soil moisture levels to stimulate germination and dormant plants.

The second type of restoration is starting a *new* natural area, where there has been no recent known natives- the area has been plowed, disturbed, bulldozed or sprayed to the point where the Old World “soldiers” have completely replaced our native “soldiers” (The War’s Over!). I part company with many of my purist friends who maintain this area must be identical to what was there 200 years ago. This is the area to plant rare and endangered species, spectacular fields of wildflowers, and to create one’s own taste in natural areas. To this end, our firm is establishing “new” natural areas, using whatever natives we enjoy- creating bastions of Illinois seed sources for generations to come.

Along Route 17 in Stark County, there may never have been “Queen-of-the-Prairie”, or “Royal Catchfly”, but you better believe, with our knowledge of creating wall-to-wall wildflowers with simple burn management, Route 17 will be a tremendous Illinois seed source for generations to come!

At this time, I want to point out some “principles” we’ve learned through successes and failures over the past 21 years:

- 1- There exists on many sites, and is most times neglected, a precious seed and plant bank of natives that used to be!
- 2- You need high soil temperatures and high soil moisture at the same time to create quick germination of both native grasses and wildflowers!
- 3- Wildflower and native grass seeds, when ripe, fall to the ground, bury *themselves*, and await your burn to germinate!
- 4- You have just as much time to get wildflowers into a natural planting as you can keep the aggressive native grasses out!
- 5- A. You need a *permanent* fuel matrix, a permanent erosion control matrix, and a permanent weed replacer matrix in restoration to be successful- grasses like Big Blue Stem, Tussock Sedge, and Pennsylvania Sedge will provide all three matrices.
 B. You need a *temporary* fuel matrix, a temporary erosion control matrix, and a temporary weed replacer matrix while the permanent matrices are becoming established- grasses like Prairie Wild Rye, Rice Cut Grass, and Old World cool season grasses will provide all three matrices.
 C. You need a *temporary-temporary* fuel matrix, a temporary-temporary erosion control matrix, and a temporary-temporary weed replacer matrix to have a successful restoration and provide cover until the temporary matrices are established. Grasses like Barnyard Grass, Foxtail, Oats, Timothy, Redtop, Winter Rye, and Quack Grass will provide all three matrices.

By struggling to understand these five little-known and misunderstood biological wonders, a whole new outdoors awaits you in native restorations.

Jock Ingels was the President of the LaFayette Home Nursery of LaFayette, Illinois. Jock led the commercial prairie planting movement from the 1970's until his death in 1998. He made commercial restoration possible. Jock was the shining star of the prairie movement.

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