

Land Stewardship during a Pandemic – Weed Warriors 2020

Stewardship of City-owned land looked very different at every level during 2020. Prior to the pandemic, staff had planned on expanding the City Weed Warrior program to the Underwood parcel and kicking that off during an April Earth Month event. Unfortunately, the pandemic caused everyone to cancel most events and rethink how community engagement activities were planned and implemented.

While we did not know how the 2020 invasive plant removal season was going to go, staff continued working with our consultant to figure out how best to pursue the management work that was continuing from previous seasons. Due to state health guidance, we changed our focus from organized, group volunteer efforts, to one-on-one experiences between experienced volunteers and the City consultant. This was far from the standard staff wanted to set for the season, but work in our natural area parks was able to continue; and when looking back at the year, a lot of good progress was made towards improving wildlife habitat and native plant diversity.

Invasive plant removal efforts were focused on all of our natural area parks, including Red Rocks, Wheeler, and Underwood. In addition to those parks, removal and monitoring was re-instated at City Center Park. Due to the continued removal efforts over the last three years at Red Rocks and Wheeler, there is clear evidence of a successful transition from invasive plants to native plants in several critical locations at each park. The early detection/rapid response tool continues to be powerful with many high-impact plant species being identified and targeted for removal early, including: oriental bittersweet, multi-flora rose, and garlic mustard.

This was the first season of focused invasive plant management at Underwood. Our consultant paid two visits to that site in order to monitor for wild parsnip and phragmites, and successfully removed two wild parsnips along the road corridor. In addition to that work, about 156 non-native shrubs were cut in the open shrubland area. This latter work is in addition to the City's ongoing brush-hog/mowing regime taking place annually. Work is proposed to continue at Underwood in 2021, with expanded invasive shrub removal and continued monitoring of plants that were cut in 2020 and any incoming threats. Staff are hoping to introduce volunteers to this site through the Weed Warrior program in 2021 in order to assist staff in the expansion of work happening at Underwood.

Our work continued at both Red Rocks and Wheeler, with a total of 15.5 days spent by our consultant at both parks. We also had three-four volunteers participate in group management sessions at Red Rocks, and four individuals provided seven hours of service at Wheeler. All volunteers had previous Weed Warrior training experience, and were guided by the City consultant on which areas of the parks to work in and which plants to target.

At Red Rocks, Oriental bittersweet, garlic mustard, glossy buckthorn, and Japanese knotweed continue to be species of concern throughout the park. During the season, our consultant targeted 13 hotspots of Oriental bittersweet, multiple locations of multi-flora rose, two locations of garlic mustard, and one hotspot of burning bush.

The species of concern at Wheeler include: wild parsnip, wild chervil, knapweed, burdock, mugwort, comfrey, garlic mustard, glossy buckthorn, Oriental bittersweet, and multi-flora rose. This year, our consultant targeted nine hotspots of Oriental bittersweet, three garlic mustard populations, removed

546 wild parsnip plants, and treatment of isolated patches of multi-flora rose, burning bush, glossy buckthorn, Oriental bittersweet, and amur maple.

As noted above, this season marked the return of invasive plant management to City Center Park. The focus this year was monitoring and “Weed Control” of invasive shrubs, vines, and herbaceous plants. Glossy buckthorn continues to be the dominant invasive plant at this park, with Oriental bittersweet establishing a minor presence. The City consultant conducted two site visits this season, but there was significant volunteer contribution throughout the year. The focus of removal efforts was on honeysuckle and buckthorn.

The pandemic taught us a lot in 2020. It showed us that we need to be resilient in the face of adversity. Land management is no different, and as we reflect on a season that some say was lost, we see endless determination and resiliency in the amount of work completed and the effort provided by those trained volunteers that continued to serve their community during one of the most difficult periods any of us have witnessed. The City has a wonderful consultant that continued moving us towards our stewardship and engagement goals during this period, and it is exciting to think about how much more success we can have when we finally reach the point in the pandemic where full programming can once again be reinstated.

To wrap up this year’s summary, staff would like to thank Mike Bald, owner of *Got Weeds?*, and all of those volunteers that stepped up big this year. Your determination this season made a huge impact and we are incredibly lucky to have all of you as part of the City Stewardship Team.

If you have questions about the City’s Weed Warrior program or our invasive plant removal efforts, please contact Ashley Parker, City Project Manager at: aparker@sburl.com.