

Of trees and shrubs



June 9, 2020 By Nate Smelle

Every time I look in my backyard I am reminded of a day more than a decade ago that I spent donating my blood to the local black fly population while planting trees and shrubs I purchased from the Bancroft and Area Stewardship Council. Having ordered a variety of plants, before I broke ground I made sure to do some research regarding which locations on my property would best suit each species. After conducting a quick study on planting conditions I learned that the red pine I acquired loved well-drained sandy soils and rocky outcroppings; that white pine do well in more acidic soil; sugar maple like to put their roots down in deep, moist, and well drained earth, and that high bush cranberry and red osier dogwood shrubs would grow almost anywhere in North Hastings. Setting out on the trail with a backpack full of bundles and a shovel I spent the morning searching out the necessary conditions for growth. After a brief lunch of black fly salad, I took the rest of the day carefully introducing each organism to its new ecosystem. Feeling a sense of pride at the end of the day, I recall sitting on a rock in the forest imagining what the forest would look like when each of the new additions reached maturity. Dizzy from the blood and sweat loss, I stumbled back to the house and spent the remainder of the night reading on each of the species and taking a few notes about what I had observed that day. Since then, with a few breaks here and there, I have been watching these plants establish themselves and grow. So far the red pines ? now six feet taller than when I planted them ? seem to be doing the best as far as trees go. However, it was not this species that inspired me to dig out my planting notes over the weekend. Earning this honour was the high bush cranberry shrubs now enhancing the view from my kitchen window. While cooking dinner the other night, out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of wings bursting from the bush and then disappearing. Grabbing my camera, I turned the heat down on the stove and waited by the window, keeping an eye on the direction which the elusive birds had flown. As I kept watch, I realized that whatever type of bird it was my movements indoors had startled, it was likely a species that enjoys high bush cranberries now and then. Within minutes the mystery was solved when I spotted a flock of cedar waxwings had, seemingly out of nowhere, returned to the shrub for a feast. As I photographed and filmed the birds plucking last year's berries from the bush, I started thinking of all the other species I had photographed on this one particular plant over the years. Making a list mentally I remembered a flock of wild turkeys and a ruffed grouse last winter, countless robins and flycatchers, and a pine grosbeak to name a few immediately coming to mind. Noticing that the beautiful white flowers which decorate high bush cranberry shrubs in the spring were beginning to blossom, I thought about the other species that benefit from this generous plant. Just that day I had taken photos of the first eastern tiger swallowtail butterfly and bumble bee of 2020. A few weeks earlier I had a staring contest with a red squirrel. In the past white-tailed deer have slept beneath it and nibbled its branches. Becoming curious about the abundance of ecosystem services this single species provides as all these memories came flooding in, I decided to read through my planting notes during dinner. Seeing a little star scribbled on the page beside the words ?high bush cranberry? I followed a penciled in arrow pointing to the words ?host plant.? From that point on I was down the rabbit hole, researching host plants and the ecosystem services they provide in maintenance of biodiversity. Monarch butterflies and milkweed, black-eyed Susan's and silvery checkerspot butterflies, coneflowers and red admirals ? the more I looked the more

symbiotic relationships I found. Thinking of how much I had learned about the interconnectedness of all living things as a result of planting, observing and studying this single species it occurred to me how little we truly know about nature and the planet we call home.