

The New Lexington Plant Nursery

By Holly Samuels, Lexington Conservation Steward

For a few years an idea has been brewing to create a nursery area to grow small native herbaceous plants and shrubs for the purpose of restoring Lexington conservation areas and perhaps for sale to the public for residential yards. That idea is in the process of being realized this year at Lower Vine Brook conservation area. A tree nursery had already been established in this area, and there is a water source at the site. With Lexington Conservation Commission permission to develop a small plant nursery at this site, planning began in earnest in winter 2020-21.

Due to the heavy pressure in this area from rabbits and other herbivores who would find a nice banquet with tender new plants, the growing area had to be enclosed. A hoop house was envisioned to keep out larger animals such as deer, and large birds such as wild turkeys that also like to browse on tender plants. We were fortunate to receive a donation from Lexington residents Meg and John Himmel of ten large hoops that had originally been salvaged from the old Lexington Gardens Nursery. With that donation we could really begin to envision the possibilities.

Preliminary work to prepare the site began with a workday on April 10, 2021, the first Stewardship Saturday of the season. Boy Scouts and LHS Conservation Club members, as well as some adults, for a total of 21 people came together to clear weeds and brush, lay out cardboard covered with wood chips to suppress future weed growth, move some small trees, and lay out the footprint of the hoop house with landscape fabric. Thank you to the LexDPW for bringing a dumpster loaded with wood chips and for carting off the collected brush to the composting facility. Further work was done on another Stewardship Saturday in May with families from Temple Isaiah to clear invasive Garlic Mustard from the area. The area will require ongoing work into the foreseeable future with annual removal of Garlic Mustard and invasive Bittersweet vine but the hoop house area is clear.

In June, proceeds from the sale of pollinator plants to the public in Spring 2021 were made available and, after researching and acquiring all of the supplies needed to install the hoops, work was begun on July 17, 2021 to erect the structure. Many thanks to volunteer Conservation Stewards Don Grant, Stephen Perkins, and Barbara Katzenberg, volunteer Jim Constantine (a willing husband, bless him), LHS students, and the Conservation Summer Work Crew members who helped with the 'barn raising'. It was very exciting to see it all come together into an actual structure. In subsequent weeks the hoop house was enclosed with poultry wire and shade netting, given a custom-made door, and an enclosed 'backyard' for establishing some in-ground plantings to use for seed stock. There is also an area fully shaded with a tarp for both sun and rain protection. The need for protection became clear while the structure was being erected. We discovered both how hot it gets in there and how important rain shelter is during a sudden downpour!

Seed planting will begin in January for seed that requires overwintering before it will sprout, in a process called *cold stratification*. Those seed flats will be stored at the nursery overwinter. The hoop house will remain open to the elements so the plants are grown in natural conditions, supplemented by water only during the summer months as needed. will cut down on the need for supplemental watering. Young plants will be protected over winter and grown to resilient sizes for a better chance of survival in the wild, and plant selection will include many varieties that are less likely to be browsed by deer and rabbits. Plants will be grown from seed sourced from New England ecotypes as much as possible, with the aim of diversifying the plantings in our conservation areas with pollinator-friendly plants and especially for restoring areas that are being reclaimed from invasive plant growth. Future pre-order sales to the public for residential planting are also planned. Thank you, again, to all who helped make this initial nursery establishment a success and we look forward to what it will grow into in the future!

Anyone interested in volunteering to work in the nursery learning how to sow seed or transplant seedlings into larger pots can contact Holly Samuels at lexplantnursery@gmail.com