

Nature's Second Chance: Restoring the Ecology of Stone Prairie Farm

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In Review



Nature's Second Chance: Restoring the Ecology of Stone Prairie Farm

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Beacon

When the land for my suburban Chicago subdivision was bulldozed in the late 1960s, the topsoil was scraped off and sold. Wildflowers and trees were scrapped for landfill. Developers left a blank dirt slate, ready for the new homeowners to chalk the sum of their desires upon it. Mostly, this meant lots of arborvitae, cheap ash trees and whatever was on sale at the local discount garden center that spring. It was a long way from the native tallgrass prairie that once blanketed the land.

Ecologist Steven Apfelbaum knows this disconnect firsthand. As a Chicago suburbanite, he fell in love with the remnant prairie landscape at an early age. Once established as an ecological designer and restorationist, Apfelbaum found that designing native landscapes for homeowners and corporations whetted his appetite for a restored landscape of his own. With this in mind, he purchased three acres in southern Wisconsin (which eventually expanded to 80). In tones ranging from poetic to professional to preachy, he tells the 30-year story of the restoration in *Nature's Second Chance: Restoring the Ecology of Stone Prairie Farm*.

When Apfelbaum first moved into the dilapidated house on the property and assessed the few acres he had to work with, he encountered the vast gulf between idealism and reality. Though he controlled the acreage around his home, he held no sway over the land that adjoined it. And everything, he discovered, is interconnected.

The proverbial city guy moving to the country, Apfelbaum learned to balance his disdain for commercial agriculture with respect for the wisdom and knowledge that comes only with generations of living on a particular piece of land. Although his neighbors viewed his project with skepticism at first (wildflowers instead of corn?), the increasing abundance of wildlife and the beauty and health of his acreage eventually brought many of them around to making positive changes on their own land. However, throughout *Nature's Second Chance*, Apfelbaum seems torn between broad generalizations about his neighbors and his vision for including them in wider restoration efforts. It's an uneasy tension.

There is also tension between Apfelbaum and his partner, Susan, whom he met nine years after moving onto Stone Prairie Farm. Susan loved traditional garden flowers like peonies, but Apfelbaum was a purist and wanted only native plants. Susan's son, Noah, an adolescent when he moved to the farm, despised the gray fungus growing in the shower and the freezing temperatures in the house and longed for a more

comfortable abode. The kitchen was cramped and mostly unusable, there were no laundry facilities, and the house was infested with rats. Apfelbaum learned to temper his idealism in order to maintain healthy relationships.

Apfelbaum offers an intriguing vision for sustainability that includes shared hiking trails, floodwater-management landscapes and organic farming. He anticipates great rewards for people willing to “build a community based on a shared vision of ecological and human health.” Indeed, “the process of restoring land health in itself consoles and inspires the human spirit.” He encourages readers not to wait for the government to solve environmental problems but to begin taking action themselves.

A few years ago, I cleared a small plot in my suburban backyard and planted prairie wildflowers and grasses. In a low spot I dug a small pond that retains rainwater, and I planted a garden with tomatoes and peppers. Now, when dragonflies buzz over the pond and a coyote slips through the prairie patch, I’m encouraged. Each small step brings me closer to understanding the land I live on, closer to using it with love and respect. I think that may be what Apfelbaum had in mind all along.