

WINTER

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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Love and Stiltgrass

By Toni Genberg



A MARC GENBERG TRAIL TEMPORARY MARKER. ALL PHOTOS IN THIS ARTICLE BY TONI GENBERG.

“Indefatigable.” That’s the adjective that best describes the many exceptional individuals leading invasive plant removals in our local parks and other natural areas. Sure, I’ve previously pitched in on their efforts, helping to remove English ivy (*Hedera helix*), garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), mile-a-minute weed (*Persicaria perfoliata*) and other harmful plants—but I’d never considered joining those unsung heroes’ impressive ranks. Restoration leaders work hard. They schedule regular invasive management days for weekends, coordinate and wrangle volunteers, and take on a lot of lonely solo work. Their task is a daunting and unending enterprise. And it’s completely unglamorous to boot.

But there I found myself this past summer in Reston’s Lake Fairfax Park, a newly certified [Invasive Management Area](#) (IMA) program lead, toiling in the [Northern Hemisphere’s toastiest summer on record](#): bending, squatting, sweating, and endlessly repeating.

How did I get here?

When I was first introduced to this wooded area of the park, it was late March. I was there with the Mid-Atlantic Off Road Enthusiasts (MORE) to start construction on a multi-use trail that would be a memorial for my husband, Marc: the “Marc Genberg Trail.”

Marc was an avid cyclist and active member of MORE and had volunteered in Lake Fairfax Park on the morning of the day he suddenly died. He was just 52. MORE was instrumental in securing

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Upcoming

Charles Smith Talk

Herbivory: Why It Is Important that Plants Get Eaten

Thursday, January 9, 7 pm
Horticulture Center, Green Spring Gardens

Native plants as the foundation of ecosystems, coevolution of species, and the importance of maintaining biodiversity.

Toni Woods Tree ID Walk Meadowlark Botanical Gardens

Saturday, January 25, 10 am-1 pm

Winter Greens Walk With Margaret Chatham at Runnymede in Herndon

Saturday, February 8, 9:30 am-12:30 pm
Snowdate February 22

Kit Sheffield Talk

Getting to Know and Love your Ferns

Thursday, February 13, 7:30-9:30 pm
Green Spring Gardens Horticulture Center

Toni Woods Tree ID Walk Location TBA

Saturday, March 7, 10 am-1 pm

Alonso Abugattas Talk

Nature’s Puzzle: How Our World Depends on Plants

Thursday, March 12, 7:30-9:30 pm
Green Spring Gardens Horticulture Center

All events are free and open to the public. Walks require preregistration. To receive email notices about upcoming events, subscribe to our mailing list group at <https://vnps.groups.io/g/potowmack>. You can also send a blank email to potowmack+subscribe@vnps.groups.io.

Manage your VNPS Membership Online

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7. Update any other profile information, then click "Submit."

Yahoo Groups [vnps-pot] has moved to Groups.io

The Potowmack Chapter has moved the Yahoo Groups [vnps-pot] email list to [Groups.io](https://groups.io), a replacement for Yahoo Groups. The Yahoo group is now closed, so please send all future email notices, discussion items, questions, etc. to potowmack@vnps.groups.io

The reasons are many, including that Yahoo no longer hosts message archives. Yahoo stopped offering customer support for Yahoo Groups some time ago, and there has been no public statement about the future of Yahoo Groups. Groupsio also offers better features and is easier to use - plus no advertisements.

All of the old [vnps-pot] Yahoo Group content has been copied to [Groups.io](https://groups.io) (messages, photos, etc.) and of course the list of subscribers (members). You won't have to do anything to continue receiving emails from the new group at [Groups.io](https://groups.io).

To access the new Potowmack archives and other content and to join the group, visit <https://vnps.groups.io/g/potowmack>.

WINTER WEEDING AT FRASER PRESERVE

The good news is that previous years of pulling Japanese barberry have been successful enough that only a limited number of barberry plants remain. The bad news is that while we've been working on barberry, multiflora rose has been spreading far and wide. So once again this winter, you are invited to come to Fraser Preserve to be cheerfully destructive of invasive exotic plants, removing fruits first, then getting them out of the ground, using garden forks and weed wrenches, aided by loppers and hand clippers. Margaret Chatham will lead the charge 10 am-2 pm (or whenever you need to leave) on Fridays Jan 3, 24, & Feb 7, and Wednesdays Jan 8, 15, 22, 29, Feb 5, 12, 19, & 26, or however many of these dates have suitable weather and unfrozen ground. Contact margaret.chatham@verizon.net if you want to participate. We'll meet at the gate (north end of Springvale Road in Great Falls), and decide session by session where to work. Dress for the woods and weather, bring heavy leather gloves against the thorns, clippers, loppers, and garden forks if you have them, water, needed snacks, etc. Of course, as we work, we will also note the good stuff we see: grape ferns (*Sceptridium spp.*), ebony spleenwort (*Asplenium platyneuron*), spring beauties (*Claytonia virginica*), yellow corydalis (*Corydalis flavula*), and more.

Fairfax County's Invasive Management Area (IMA) Program

Help remove invasive plants, learn about new invasive species, enjoy the company of others who care about the environment. Open to age 11 and up; volunteers under 14 must be accompanied by an adult. For more info, see <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/invasive-management-area> or contact Erin Stocksclaeder at 703-324-8681 or erin.stocksclaeder@fairfaxcounty.gov.



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LOVE AND STILTGRASS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

approval for Marc’s memorial from the Fairfax County Park Authority and had spent a good deal of time advocating. They knew Marc well and knew that the trail would be an exceptional and enduring honor for an extraordinary man. Naturally, I didn’t want to miss a single day of its construction.

That first early spring Saturday, and the next four, were coordinated by MORE trail leads, Frank Raiti and Tony Watkins. They were the driving force and

attitudes and radiated with warm smiles—and most hadn’t had the fortune to meet Marc.

Friends of mine and Marc’s friends also stopped by to help. And on one of the days, Marc’s 85-year-old dad, Dick, eagerly drove down from Pennsylvania to work side by side with men less than half his age. The entire effort was amazing.

The new section of [singletrack](#) trail wound its way through a designated wildlife sanctuary and connected at either end to other existing trails. It cut under a canopy of mature oaks (*Quercus spp.*) and tulip trees (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) and around evergreen American holly (*Ilex opaca*), Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) and partridge-berry (*Mitchella repens*)—and other plants that were, for the moment, leafless. Beautiful and peaceful, this setting resonated wildly because Marc and I had often explored similar territory together. We roamed many Virginia trails and untold miles over 17 years, and hiking was hands-down our favorite activity. On one of our early outings, Marc, ever the naturalist at heart, had taught me to identify my first locally native tree—the American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*)—and he was vocal about planting oak trees long before it became Doug Tallamy’s call to action.

After five rain-free days filled with digging, raking, shoveling, gravel-slinging and plant-relocating, the meandering one-third mile woodland trail was completed. It was one of the best sections in the park, I was later told by Marc’s cycling friends, with a grueling uphill climb that Marc would’ve enjoyed powering through.

MORE held an intimate informal dedication on May 4th, led by their president, Ernie Rodriguez. Then, at a public ceremony on June 1st, on National Volunteer Day, the Fairfax County Park Authority [officially dedicated](#) the “Marc Genberg Trail.” Supervisor Cathy Hudgins, Park Authority Deputy Director Sara Baldwin and Park Authority Board Bill Bouie imparted kind words about Marc and his years of volunteerism.

Surprise, Surprise.

During those spring trail-making days, there wasn’t much green unfurling just yet. The deciduous plants that were most conspicuous were the invasive Japanese barberry shrubs (*Berberis thunbergii*) that



FRANK RAITI (IN GRAY) AND TONY WATKINS (IN RED) LEAD A TRAIL WORK DAY IN APRIL (ABOVE). DICK GENBERG, MARC’S DAD, BUILDING HIS SON’S MEMORIAL (BELOW).



inspiration for the impressive number of volunteers who turned out: men and women of varying ages, teenagers and children, MORE cycling members and other trail users. These folks all possessed gung-ho

dotted the landscape. *Wouldn't this be a relatively easy area to maintain?* I thought early on. I decided I would be IMA-certified so I could officially remove the invasive plants surrounding Marc's trail. I would want to visit frequently anyway.

However, time moved forward, and plants quietly grew. By the time May rolled around, what was formerly a latent beige-colored understory was now a vibrant green. And I knew exactly what that sort of growth indicated. *Yes, I was duped!* It was the hateful Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*), out in full force. And I had already committed to Fairfax County. The reliably truthful words "no good deed goes unpunished" popped into my head and made me grin. It was a phrase Marc was fond of saying.

I did my homework and read up on [Japanese stiltgrass](#), and I also asked the Arlington Regional Master Naturalists for suggestions. The outlook was not particularly positive but could've been interpreted as hopeful, in a masochistic kind of way. Their collective advice: "Just keep on pulling."



JAPANESE STILTGRASS, BEFORE.

So, pull I did.

The effort to remove *Microstegium vimineum* has been called a Sisyphean task by a few knowing naturalist friends. Sisyphus, for the similarly uncultured, was a mythological Greek figure who was condemned to an eternity of frustrating labor: rolling a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again. A perfect analogy, I thought—once I looked it up.

Healing the Land, Easing a Heart

Once a week throughout the steamy summer, I attacked not only stiltgrass, but also Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*), oriental bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatis*), small barberry plants and

patches of wavyleaf basketgrass (*Oplismenus undulatifolius*). The stiltgrass, low in stature and crazily abundant, was naturally the worst of it. Hand-pulling it from in and around the various ferns, sedges (*Carex spp.*), hog-peanut (*Amphicarpa bracteata*), poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) and other native plants was a tedious chore. *So this is what it's like to weed a forest?* I wondered.

But those long stretches of labor tended to be tolerable, even as sweat continually streamed into my eyes and the humidity fogged my glasses. On occasion, I'd be greeted by Marc's teammates from *The Bike Lane*, who were out on a joyful ride. Sometimes a curious passerby would stop to inquire about my efforts. And many times I'd be given the opportunity to educate the dog walker who moved through the area with their pet running off-leash.

What I came to appreciate was the quiet and solitude on weekdays, since Marc's trail was seldom frequented then. It was a time of reflection, of thoughts that could be painful; a longing indescribable. Marc should be here.

Often, a pileated woodpecker's hollow drumming would interrupt the silence—and a few times I heard the piercing call of a hawk. And there was this one memorable encounter: while I knelt under a very tall tulip tree, I heard a sudden "plop!" What fell from high, high above was large, chubby and brilliantly



green: a tulip tree silkworm caterpillar. *Hey my plump friend. Perhaps you're also moving towards your next stage of life?*

Frequently, I came upon other interesting insects, as well as frogs, toads, turtles, and two different snake species. Arthropods that I'd never seen in the wild before, such as a northern walking stick and a marbled orb weaver, completely delighted me and relieved the monotony.

Getting down and personal with the forest floor also allowed me an opportunity to observe the evolving plant life. Fleeting flowers that I could easily have missed, such as those of cranefly orchid

(*Tipularia discolor*) and downy rattlesnake plantain (*Goodyera pubescens*), were discovered in pockets of stiltgrass. Later, I watched the cheery yellow of a woodland sunflower (*Helianthus divaricatus*) come into bloom and the green fruit of partridge-berry slowly develop into a vibrant candy-red. At some point the fronds of cut-leaf grape fern (*Sceptridium dissectum*) also made a magical appearance.



SAVE THE CRANEFLY ORCHIDS!

Since I considered this first year an experiment, I typically worked on my own, but not always. A few generous friends with probably more compassion than altruism gave up part of their days to work in tandem with me. The monthly restoration days I posted on the Fairfax County volunteer site and on MORE's event calendar brought in more help and made the effort very productive.

Time well spent

At the end of the stiltgrass removal window, which for me was late September, I was ready for a break. In total, DC recorded a whopping sixty-two 90+ degree days and had experienced a "flash" drought to boot.



ABOVE: DAVID SHOWS OFF A HANDFUL OF STILTGRASS. HE AND HIS PARENTS HELPED MAKE A DIFFERENCE ON AN IMA WORK DAY.
BELOW: STILTGRASS, AFTER.



The extreme weather was definitely one of my stressors.

But so much has been accomplished this first year in the park. The trail edges leading to and along Marc's memorial are in better shape and one large section of hillside on the north-west side of his trail is now essentially—a word I use loosely here—invasive-free.

Alas, I'm aware that the ripened stiltgrass seeds, stubbornly viable in the soil for up to seven years, will sprout throughout the upcoming growing seasons. But I'm hopeful that there will be less of an infestation as time passes. Time will also reveal whether I'm truly indefatigable too.

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Word of the Month: Lichen



Lichen: defined in *Merriam Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* as any of numerous complex thallophytic plants made up of an alga and a fungus growing in symbiotic association on a solid surface. Yeah, we all knew that, as long as you add cyanobacteria as possible associates with the fungus. But here is an unusual lichen in which you can see the fungus growing out of its supporting alga.

Shown here, *Multiclava mucida*, on a log at Fraser Preserve. Thanks to Penny Firth and Thomas Roehl for the ID.

Photo by Margaret Chatham