



American Players Theatre
Prairie Guide



APT's Champion Oak Tree.
Photo by Justine Myers.

**Learn about APT's landscape
and ecological mission.**

THE APT LANDSCAPE

American Players Theatre is nestled on 110 acres characterized by rolling wooded hills, limestone outcroppings, oak savanna and dry prairie.

APT's founders deliberately sought an outdoor setting, affirming for actor and audience alike the inspiration that many of the great playwrights derived from the natural world. Here, in this setting, playgoers experience first hand the sights and sounds; the forces and elements of nature so evident in these great stories: trees, flowers, birds (and other winged creatures), stars, moon, wind and weather.

As stewards of the land we take great pride in the restoration efforts we make to accommodate the many rare and diverse species that live here. APT invites you to experience its unique beauty, and to learn about the rich natural heritage of this land on which we are privileged to make our home and share these amazing stories.



Prairie path located outside APT's Touchstone Theatre. Photo by Justine Myers.

PRAIRIES

In 1830, prairies covered two million acres of Wisconsin. Today, only 2,000 scattered acres survive. Since the late 1980s, APT has increased the amount of native prairie square acreage due to our restoration efforts. With seed collection, plantings, control of invasive species and controlled burns, we have been able to bring back some of the diversity and beauty of the flora and fauna that once flourished here.



Wild lilies can be found scattered around APT.
Photo by Justine Myers.

Prairie Types Found at APT

Dry, little water: Dry shallow soil over sand or limestone. Dry prairies on steep slopes are also called “Goat Prairies.”

Mesic: Some water, medium-deep silt or sandy loam (soil with sand, silt and clay), good drainage.

Our prairies consist of both native grasses and prairie wildflowers, also known as forbs. Their colorful blooms attract bees, butterflies and other pollinating insects. To get enough sunlight, forbs tend to match the height of the grasses. Look for low-growing forbs in the spring, when grasses are still short. Summer and fall forbs are much taller.

The top of the hill located on “The Walk on the Wild Side” nature trail is an example of a pre-settlement prairie, or remnant-prairie. Once covering the entire hillside, the prairie area had

been slowly encroached upon by red cedar and invasive woody shrubs. In 2010, we resolved to restore it. The remnant was burned through a prescribed fire and select aspen were girdled (cut all the way around in order to kill a tree.) Because the aspen were not felled, as they decay they will provide a habitat for red-headed woodpecker and other animals, and the decreased shade will allow sunlight to permeate to the plants below. Red cedar and prickly ash trees were removed, which is allowing the prairie to reclaim this area again.

Ongoing management, including prescribed burns, is required to ensure that invasive species do not establish themselves here. The area is home to at-risk wildlife species such as the ornate box turtle, grasshopper sparrow and brown thrasher. Rare, endangered and threatened plant species found here are purple milkweed and prairie turnip.

This prairie restoration project was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and is maintained through the support of our Green Sponsors.

OAK SAVANNA

In 2008, APT started restoring a six-acre area on the eastern edge of the property back to its historical Oak Savanna condition. A savanna is generally defined as a plant community where a low density of trees allows grasses and other herbaceous vegetation to become dominant. Oak Savanna is one of the most threatened plant communities in the Midwest and many of the associated wildlife that rely upon this habitat, such as red-headed woodpeckers and whippoorwills, are considered rare. Removing encroaching invasive tree and brush species allows for the regeneration of desirable trees and shrubs, and an expanded habitat for nesting bird species. In the fall of 2012, with the help of volunteers from the Ice Age Trail Alliance, APT staff and volunteers began building a nature trail that takes visitors through the savanna.



APT's oak savanna located up the hill.

Photos by Justine Myers.

It is a leisurely, 9-minute stroll, and makes for a nice nature walk during intermissions of Touchstone Theatre shows.

The oak savanna project was made possible, in part, by a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is maintained through the support of our Green Sponsors.

Oak Wilt

Oak wilt is a fungal disease that can quickly kill an oak tree and is a challenge to the APT property. Symptoms consist of leaf discoloration, wilt, defoliation and death. The fungus is spread from infected trees to healthy trees by means of root grafting (roots growing together under ground when trees are in close proximity to each other) and by insects. Management efforts consist of trenching, or cutting the roots that may have grafted together, in hopes of preventing the spread of the disease. Infected trees are quickly removed and burned. Our most prized oaks on the property are receiving preventive treatments to help protect them.

Roots and Fire

Fire was a regular feature of pre-European settlement. Native Americans used fire for security and to manipulate game. A site such as APT's may have been burned annually under such stewardship.

Fire is one of the major management tools we use at American Players Theatre to ensure the health of our prairies and oak savanna. Most prairie species are perennials. The tops die off in the winter, but the root stock survives and re-sprouts in the spring. Fire renews a prairie. It burns the dried dead tops of the plants without damaging the roots. Burned prairies warm up faster and absorb rain more quickly, which allows new shoots to grow sooner. Nutrients from the ash including potash, phosphorus and calcium leach into the soil as the rain falls on it. Fire is essential for native prairie clover and lead plant. These two forbs help to fix the nitrogen in the soil.



Prairie burnings at APT. Photo by Justine Myers.

Burning of the oak savanna helps to remove the leaf litter that is left when the oaks go dormant for the season. By removing the leaf litter, we give way to the sedges, grasses and forbs native to the savanna habitat that help to increase wildlife food like acorns and other seeds. Oak trees have adapted to fire, whereas weedy trees and other undesirable species are less resistant and can be suppressed with regularly prescribed burns.

THE BATTLE WITH INVASIVES

Invasive species are those that are not native and have been brought here – intentionally or otherwise – from their natural range. Because they are introduced without any of the competitors, insects or diseases that keep them in check in their home environment, quite a few of them will start to out-compete native vegetation. In addition, many invasive plants have life cycles that give them an advantage, such as flowering and setting seed much earlier in the season than the natives. Some even alter the chemistry or composition of the soil, altering native plant growth. Invasive species can alter relationships among native species and affect ecosystem function, economic value of ecosystems and human health.

APT has been battling invasive plants for many years. It is a labor-intensive endeavor, which includes cutting, pulling, digging, spot treating with herbicide and/or burning at specific times during the season to try to disrupt the growth and seed set of these exotic plants. Some of the species you may see include garlic mustard, Eurasian honeysuckle, buckthorn, Japanese barberry, sweet white clover, autumn olive and multi-flora rose. While it is unlikely we will be able to eliminate all of these species entirely, with persistent effort we will be able to keep the populations at a manageable level that does not completely alter the native ecosystem. Each spring more than 75 volunteers join APT staff to weed out invasive plants.

A long-term habitat management guide has been developed to determine our yearly property goals. Breeding bird and other animal and plant monitoring surveys are conducted regularly to help direct management decisions and goals.

These and other efforts are supported by grants from Green Sponsors: Helen Baldwin, J.H. Findorff & Sons, Inc., Tom Kurtz, Howard Learner & Lauren Rosenthal, Lori Neumann & Jim Sinclair, Joe & Rita Radtke, Mark & Peggy Timmerman.

SPECIAL PLANT SPECIES AT APT



CLUSTERED POPPY
MALLOW (SPECIAL CONCERN)



PURPLE MILK WEED
(ENDANGERED)



PRAIRIE TURNIP
(SPECIAL CONCERN)



FAME FLOWER
(SPECIAL CONCERN)

PRAIRIE RESIDENTS AT APT



GOPHER SNAKE
(SPECIAL CONCERN)



ORNATE BOX TURTLE
(ENDANGERED)



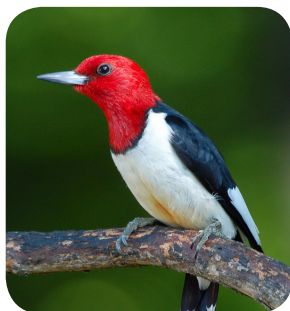
NET VEINED LEAFHOPPER
(THREATENED)



FIELD SPARROW
(WATCH LIST)



WHIPPOORWILL
(WATCH LIST)



RED HEADED
WOODPECKER (WATCH LIST)



BROWN THRASHER
(WATCH LIST)

Images in the Special Plants and Prairie Residents sections are stock photos.

MONITORING APT'S PLANTS AND WILDLIFE

With so many plant and wildlife species that are categorized as endangered, special concern or on the watch list at APT, we do our best to monitor their growth and regrowth. Plant species have been marked with white flags placed to track their improvements. We ask that if you notice one of these flags that you look, but not touch, as we depend on such markers to aid in the rejuvenation of plant life.

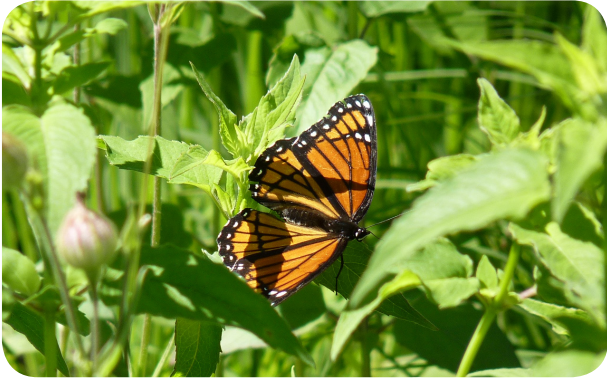
FUN FACTS

Our Beloved Champion Tree

In 2013 our signature black oak, located near the pavilion picnic shelter, was measured and named a Champion Tree or one of the largest of the species. At that time it was found to be the fourth largest black oak in the state of Wisconsin. You can see our Champion Tree on the cover of this brochure! 9

Butterfly Resort

In 2014 we became registered as a Monarch Waystation. These are places that provide resources necessary for monarch butterflies to produce successive generations and sustain their migration. Without milkweed and nectar from flowers, the monarch would be unable to make their long journey to wintering grounds in Mexico. The monarch migration is truly one of the world's greatest natural wonders, yet it is threatened by breeding habitat loss throughout the United States and Canada. For more info: MonarchWatch.org.



Monarch Butterfly in Touchstone Prairie.
Photo by Justine Myers.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Sponsorship

If you would like to contribute to restoration and preservation efforts at APT, contact our development staff at 608-588-9209 or development@americanplayers.org

Volunteering

Interested in volunteering? As stewards of this place and of the many rare and diverse species that live here, APT invites you to join us in pledging yourself to its preservation and protection by learning more about the rich natural heritage of this land. If you would like to volunteer for hands-on prairie and savanna restoration activities, contact Justine Myers, Facilities Manager, at 608-588-9211 or jmyers@americanplayers.org.

Additional Resources

- *A Practical Guide to Prairie Reconstruction*
by Carl Kurtz.

- *The Tallgrass Restoration Handbook (for prairies, savannas and woodlands)*
by Stephen Packard and Cornelia F. Mutel.

- *Prairie Plants of the UW-Madison Arboretum*
by Theodore S. Cochrane, Kandis Elliot and
Claudia S. Lipke

- *Wildflowers of Wisconsin and the Great Lakes
Region*
by Merel R. Black and Emmet J. Judziewicz



Volunteers working to improve APT grounds.
Photo by Justine Myers.

A Gentle Reminder: Deer ticks and Lyme disease are not new to most of us. Be sure to check yourself and your trail buddies thoroughly for these tiny annoyances so they don't become larger problems. Acquaint yourself with signs and symptoms of tick-borne illnesses as they can be serious. To avoid these threats as well as poison ivy and the spreading of garlic mustard seed, please stay on the marked trails.



American Players Theatre

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