

## Wisconsin team creates Land Restoration School to lead by example in preserving biodiversity

Susan Bence :: 4/20/2023

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*Land Restoration School / The inaugural Land Restoration School cohort summer 2022 visiting Gathering Ground.*

Nancy Aten and Dan Collins live and breathe biodiversity.

For a quarter century, the landscape architect and restorationist team have quietly led and supported projects throughout the Midwest.

Aten and Collins strive to connect people with nature for the sustained benefit of both. Recently, they decided it was time to think and act seriously about the next generation of land stewards. Aten says that did not mean focusing on younger people who look or have lived experiences like them.

An extended conversation with Nancy Aten and Dan Collins.

“We’re trying to reach nontraditional participants. In this work — diversity in all ways in the cohort — strengthens the learning process and is also the way for us to help change the field,” Aten says.

In its first season, last summer they launched the [Land Restoration School](#) in collaboration with a nature center located in Door County.



*Susan Bence / WUWM / Dan Collins and Nancy Aten preparing for the 2023 school session at a still snowy UW-Milwaukee Field Station.*



*Land Restoration School / A slithery encounter during the 2022 Land Restoration School session.*

The school sets a high bar. Not only do students learn about soils, hydrology, invasive species control and a host of other topics. Each student designs a detailed, ecological restoration plan.

“We had a lot of uncertainty about whether they would each actually be able to write and develop an ecological restoration plan for a real site. It’s a big hurdle to do that in the last two weeks of an eight-week program. But that moment when they were finishing their plans and then presented them publicly was really a big wow moment for us. They all had different approaches, and it really showed in very different plans,” Aten says.



*Land Restoration School / Martina Patterson did not only present her ecological restoration plan at the conclusion of the school's 2022 session, but she and other Land Restoration School representatives also presented at the Midwest-Great Lakes Society for Ecological Restoration in April 2023.*

One student, Milwaukee artist and educator Martina Patterson chose a natural area in the rough within 30<sup>th</sup> Street Corridor.

“I identified different biomes in this 18-acre space and then designated restoration steps per biome because it might take different work in the woodland than in the riparian space,” Patterson says.

Patterson is talking about habitat types like a grassland or forest. Riparian refers to space where land and water meet — in this case Lincoln Creek. Patterson knows the waterway well.

The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District owns the parcel and allows the organization Patterson works with — called [Nearby Nature Milwaukee](#) — to collaboratively adopt the space, known by neighbors as Hopkins Hollow.

For a long time the space was an unofficial trash disposal site, but Nearby Nature started by removing the junk.

“We’ve done invasive removal, we’ve done some seeding, some plug planting,” Patterson says.



*Eddee Daniel / A Wealth of Nature / Martina Patterson (second from left) shares walk along Hopkin's Hollow trail.*

Community partners helped carve out a walking trail above the creek. Patterson is working to connect kids from nearby schools and nearby neighbors to what could become a lovely slice of nature.

“Sometimes they come out and talk to me and ask about what the plants are, are some of them edible, what they can use them for [and] etc,” Patterson says.

Patterson says she wants people to feel welcomed, as she did during her Land Restoration School experience.

*Eddee Daniel / A Wealth of Nature / Martina Patterson led a celebration of newly installed Peace Posts at Hopkin's Hollow trailhead.*



“I feel like they meet people where they are. I really appreciate that because I’ve been in different circles where sometimes people try to talk over my head and it can feel belittling. Every instructor that we had, in my opinion, they came off very passionate and very like ‘I’m at your level,’” Patterson says.

This summer, Patterson will return to the Land Restoration School, but this time as an instructor. Her topics are eco-art and ethnobotany.

“Kind of like anthropology with culture and plants. So, studying the way different cultures utilize plants in a medicinal or healing way,” Patterson says.

And the school will have a new base just 30 miles up the road from Milwaukee at the [UW - Milwaukee Field Station](#).

Co-founder Dan Collins says the station is not only a perfect place to learn about biodiversity but “A palette of different kinds of habitats — upland forest, we have meadows, we have prairies, we have emergent aquatic wetlands,” Collins says.



*Nancy Aten / A glimpse of the expansive palette of habitats within the UWM Field Station.*

The location brings the school closer to communities Aten and Collins want to be of value to. “In the past, we haven’t made the opportunity for people to come into this knowledge and this type of career. So we want to be a door opener allowing people and supporting people to learn this practice of ecological restoration,” Collins says.

That means, students don’t pay to learn, instead they receive a stipend.

Collins says the practice makes all the sense in the world. “We’re going to need to solve this problem of not enough biodiversity, not enough high quality water, not enough ecological restoration. Now’s the time that we need to solve that. And so, we understand that in order for someone to change their career, they’re going to need to make money while they do it. Everybody who attends is paid,” Collins says.

Collins and Aten call their contribution to shift biodiversity onto a healthier path a “why not moment” for them.

### [Susan Bence](#)

*Susan Bence entered broadcasting in an untraditional way. After years of avid public radio listening, Susan returned to school and earned a bachelor's degree in Journalism from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She interned for WUWM News and worked with the Lake Effect team, before being hired full-time as a WUWM News reporter / producer.*

[See stories by Susan Bence](#)