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WEDNESDAY

HOME

Published: Thursday, July 3, 2008

South Everett couple creates woodland escape where blackberries once ruled

Story by Sarah Jackson, Herald Writer
Photos by Darren Breen, Herald Photographer

Blackberry brambles -- deep, tall, thorny and mean - seem to own more than their fair share of Snohomish County real estate.

Homeowners, in turn, have resorted to desperate measures to fight the ugly, foliated beasts, including powerful pesticides, expensive machinery and hungry goats -- only to see the dreadful vines, typically evergreen blackberries or Himalayan blackberries, return.

Sometimes, however, it is the humans that emerge as winners in this weed war.

Gene and Sue Fosheim certainly count themselves among the victors.

After more than 10 years of rehabilitating two acres of a blackberry-ravaged slope below their mountain-view home in south Everett, the Fosheims have taken their land back.

It wasn't easy. "I cut them all by hand," Gene Fosheim said. "I pulled them all out by the roots every year until they stopped coming back."

Though the process has been a tedious war of attrition and at times has required help from family, friends and neighbors, the Fosheims have created more than a hillside free of the pesky weed.

They have made a sanctuary.

Native plants and wildlife, including frogs, deer and sometimes mallards, now call this hillside home, blessed with a quarter-mile of trails, man-made ponds, plus 300 specimen trees and shrubs Gene Fosheim has planted over the years.

The Fosheims didn't buy their land for the blackberries. They bought it in the mid-1990s for its spectacular view of the Cascades.

They dreaded the prospect of making sense of the brambles below, standing 20 feet tall and as wide and thick as their property.

"It was just overwhelming," Gene Fosheim said.

It wasn't long, however, until the Fosheims heard the cheerful sound of a creek running amid the tangles.

Curious and inspired, they set out with loppers, pruning their way into the mess, creating tunnels to see what was hiding under the long vines.

"I just had this desire to explore," said Gene Fosheim, who grew up in Everett. "I wanted to see what was down here. I thought, 'What if I had my own hiking trail here?' I loved to hike up in the mountains when I was younger."

Not only did the Fosheims find that stream, which runs year-round, but they also discovered huge, ancient cedar stumps and native trees and plants struggling to survive.

That's when Gene Fosheim started taking the vines down one by one with help from his sons, Tyler and Grant, who used to get paid by the bucket for picking weeds.

Soon Fosheim, who has taught engineering and architecture at Lake Washington Technical College for 25 years, started creating trails.

Though the topsoil on the hillside was rich and moist, it was resting on dense, rock-hard clay, not easy to dig through by hand.



(click to enlarge)
Gene and Sue Fosheim have two gardens, a half-acre upper garden with vegetables and ornamental plants, and a two-acre hillside garden, converted during the past 10 years from blackberry bushes to a woodland paradise.



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"That's how I get my exercise," Fosheim said. "I don't like going to a gym."

Fosheim has stashed multiple shovels and wheelbarrows throughout the hillside, where the wide paths he's created look much like hiking trails in the woods. He's also added drainage pipes to channel seasonal water gently down the slope, under trails or into ponds to avoid damage to the hillside. He digs trenches to guide water around the paths.

Trees and shrubs, including natives and climate-appropriate ornamentals, surround the trails.

"I'm trying to create this tunnel effect," Gene Fosheim said. "It's kind of cool."

Every year Fosheim buys about 100 small native plants for about \$1 each at the Snohomish Conservation District's annual plant and shrub sale in March. He uses the plants, mostly natives, to enhance and stabilize the slope.

Thanks to ample water all year long on the hillside, trees grow incredibly fast here.

Eight years ago, Fosheim planted a weeping willow the size of a broomstick. Today it's at least 40 feet tall, billowing out dramatically, creating shade and seasonal interest, along with multiple varieties of birch, aspen and ash, plus a large collection of ornamental maples, including striped-bark and peeling paper-bark varieties.

Katsura, a deciduous tree with light-green, heart-shaped leaves, is one of the many fun surprises in the Fosheim forest.

"I mix the native trees and the ones that could have been native," Fosheim said. "I'm more of a landscaper than a gardener."

Fosheim's woodland garden also includes splashes of color from blooming rhododendrons, including more than a couple big-leaf varieties acquired through his activities with the Rhododendron Species Foundation and Botanical Garden, based in Federal Way.

Sue Fosheim said a slow, steady approach helped her keep from feeling hopeless about such a large project.

"It's tackling a little bit at a time," she said. "It's not like you go out and try to do the whole thing tomorrow."

Rewards for clearing out the invasive blackberries have come in the form of naturally occurring native plants, including huge-leafed skunk cabbage, Indian plum, vine maples, even delicate maiden hair ferns.

Not every native volunteer is sacred here, however.

In fact, Gene Fosheim regularly removes elderberry and salmonberry, which tend to take over, despite their native status.

Blackberries, of course, are always trying to make their way back, too.

"When they pop up, I pull them out," Fosheim said. "All winter."

Sue Fosheim, who spends most of her gardening time in the vegetable and the ornamental gardens closer to their house, said she enjoys watching nature at work.

"I don't know where all those blackberries came from, but, underneath, it was really quite pretty," she said. "It just needed to have a chance."

Gene Fosheim is enchanted with the frogs and birds that have taken up residence in the forest.

"Look there's a frog. Right there. See?" he said, looking into a pond on a sunny day as an eagle soared overhead. "When I get some animals moved in, it makes me feel so good because then I know I've created something."

Reporter Sarah Jackson: 425-339-3037 or sjackson@heraldnet.com

RESOURCES

The Snohomish Conservation District hosts its annual tree and shrub sale every year, usually on the first weekend in March.

Plants at the sale are usually small, inexpensive starts or seedlings, ideal for creating wildlife habitat, hedgerows, erosion control and reforestation plantings.

See www.snohomishcd.org early next year to download a brochure or call 425-335-5634, ext. 4.

Washington Native Plant Society: See www.wnps.org/landscaping for a list of native plants ideal for creating a woodland, wetland or meadow on residential sites in Western Washington.

Washington's Department of Ecology offers resources on slope management using native plants, including books and detailed plant recommendations.

Visit www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs.shtm and search for "slope stabilization" and "plant selection guide."

Controlling blackberries: See dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/lands/weeds/blackberry.htm for resource and solutions.

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