

## **A Brief Report on ZooWoods**

### What is it?

ZooWoods is a small parcel of naturalized landscaping at the se corner of Ramsay Wright Zoological Laboratories. It is the only implemented piece of a more ambitious plan that would surround RWZL with a landscape that evokes the beech/maple forest that originally covered most of Toronto. Although seemingly isolated, it links conceptually to other ecologically-minded developments on the U of T campus, specifically the forthcoming revitalization of Taddle Creek and the three naturalistic plantings of the Earth Sciences Centre. Together, ZooWoods, and the ESC's prairie garden, Duffy's woods, and boreal courtyard provide samples on campus of the major types of forests (respectively, mixed forest, savanna, deciduous forest, and boreal forest) found naturally in southern Ontario.

### How did it get here?

ZooWoods was one response to the University's new policy of 1993 eliminating pesticide use on campus. A proposal and budget for low-maintenance, naturalistic plantings around RWZL was drafted by the departmental landscaping committee (which still takes care of the plantings, particularly the weeding) in May 1994 in consultation with Facilities and Services and considered and approved by the Botanical Garden and Arboretum Committee and the Master Plan Review Committee. Tree, shrub, and flower planting commenced 4 years ago, with various dignitaries on hand, and there was a ribbon-cutting 3 years ago. About 15% of the site and its explanatory sign were eliminated by the St. George St. revitalization.

### What is it about?

There are three general categories of purpose for ZooWoods, administrative, academic, and esthetic, all of which contributed to the original proposal and continue to make it an important campus element. One major impetus for the project was as an experiment to see if a different approach to campus landscaping could significantly reduce maintenance costs for F & S. It is too soon to know whether it can. ZooWoods is being used in both teaching and research. It provides a convenient array of native plants in an increasingly realistic setting to show to students in large introductory classes (and some advanced classes), without the expense and logistic difficulties of hauling them off site. It is also (along with the ESC plantings) providing excellent material for long-term studies of succession accompanying canopy closure and of invasions by native and alien species. Finally, it was intended to serve a real role in campus life, providing an opportunity, on this urban campus, of connection with the broader environment of which this University

### What are its problems?

There seem to be four kinds of complaints about ZooWoods (weeds, trash, vermin, and personal hazard), none of which hold much water in my estimation. There are actually fewer weeds in ZooWoods than in the new plantings on St. George St., for instance, or the St. George beds of Knox College. The goldenrods that are so prominent along the east edge of ZooWoods are a classic part of forest succession in this part of the world (besides being attractive to many people) and will fade away with canopy development of the trees because of their high light requirement. Most true weeds are also being shaded out now, but they, and the alien tree seedlings, are recorded as part of the research on the site before they are pulled. Trash is the responsibility of F & S here, as it is throughout the campus. There is really nothing to attract rats to ZooWoods, particularly since they have all the food waste from the Sid Smith vendors and the dumpsters in the loading dock area. That's the real habitat for vermin. Finally, ZooWoods is a cul-de-sac, like many on campus, but there is no particular reason why anyone would want to enter it at night. It's not on the way to anything and, in the dark, you can't see the plantings that are its main feature. Even so, the opportunities for lurking will decline as the trees develop and clear out the understory. Some of the problems seen in ZooWoods arise because the physical fabric of the site is not complete, in particular the pond and some other features that are waiting on resources from Facilities and Services.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Give Facilities and Services the mandate and the resources to complete the job so that the planting schemes and the natural development of the site can proceed.

### How should it be maintained?

Like the naturalistic plantings at the ESC, ZooWoods is a shared responsibility between F. and S. and a local volunteer committee, cooperating under informal arrangements. Despite concerns that have been raised from time to time about a lack of formal management structures, I think that this has proven a generally effective arrangement. There always seem to be a few people who are keenly interested in the success of the plantings and willing to put in appropriate efforts (keeping in mind that a highly manicured appearance is, in fact, inimical to the goals of ZooWoods as a naturalistic landscape). Establishment of administrative committees with written goals and scheduled meetings is unlikely to result in better maintenance and might well alienate those who now contribute freely, but better liaison with F. & S. would be welcome.

J. E. Eckenwalder, 10 Nov 1998