

## **Backyard Woods**

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**Adapted by Adam Downing, Virginia Cooperative Extension**

When I think of the word “woods” I immediately go to a place in my mind where I spent a lot of time in my first 1.5 decades of life. It was a very unremarkable little patch of woods between our yard and a drainage ditch. Knowing what I know now, it was “nothing,” but to me it was pretty special because I could explore, hide, build and discover. This little half-acre patch of woods was important to me.

Do you have woods in your backyard? Approximately 75% of Virginia’s privately owned woodlands is in ownerships of 10 acres or less. Your woods, no matter how small, are big in importance! They contribute to the ecological systems that every Virginian relies on for clean air and water. They provide wildlife habitat and beauty that benefit you, your family and the community at large.

Whether you have hundreds or just a couple of wooded acres, you may have plans for and visions about its use. In financial terms, your land is an asset; however, studies have repeatedly found that owners identify or associate other values or benefits with their woodlands. Perhaps not surprisingly, woodland owners, both large and small, report finding value in the solitude afforded by their woodlands and a sense of enjoyment with owning land. In fact, these are the two most popular values reported and are closely followed by wildlife and hunting.

It would seem that solitude, enjoyment, wildlife, maybe hunting, and many other values associated with woodland ownership should be rather easy to achieve -- they are just there and accrue over time. However, owning woodlands commonly spawns a sense of stewardship and responsibility to care for the resource for future generations. Extending this idea further, landowners may recognize that owning land connects them to a larger landscape, which is part of a community comprised of land, water, wildlife, plants, and people. This community depends on and is influenced by the actions of all who have stewardship over the land -- regardless of the size of ownership. To enhance the values landowners attribute to their land or woods it is often necessary to become actively involved, to work toward some desired future condition.

The idea of improving land is accepted by many people at some scale. In the United States homeowners and communities invest time and money “improving” landscapes. The driving

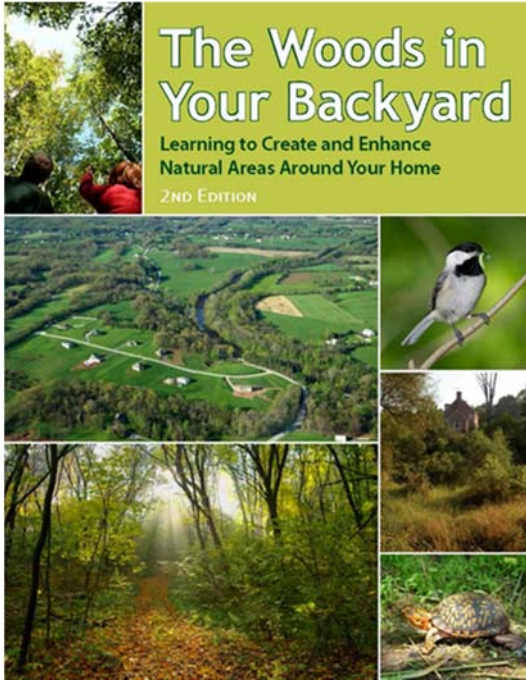
force is often aesthetics -- improving the beauty of the place. Sometimes the improvement may extend to function -- making changes to improve how a landscape functions. A common example of increasing importance might be managing storm water: capturing water runoff from roads, driveways, roofs, and lawns and having it infiltrate into pervious soils by building and planting rain gardens.

Changing and improving small spaces such as lawns seems to come naturally. People seem to get it and there are resources -- think magazines, garden shops, education events -- that help guide these decisions; neighbors tend to indirectly or directly encourage a sense of community to improve where they live.

Those trees and woods in the backyard are somehow different. Certainly the scale is different; if not in area, certainly in height and complexity. Temporally, woodlands change by seasons, but come back pretty much the same every year. Green is often the dominant color that people associate with health, especially in woodlands. However, left alone, woods become "messy," and the tendency is to "clean them up." In small woodlots and even large ones, a common response is to leave it alone if it seems healthy, and to tidy up messes. We remove dead trees; we leave live ones.

Woods are like any garden landscape. There are reasons to renew, weed, and thin. Think about it. At some point the trees and plants growing there reach their end -- age, competition, storms, insects, diseases, or whatever cause trees to decline or die. Where will the replacements come from? In healthy forests, especially in Virginia, nature should help by "planting" the next tree. Unfortunately, in many woods, especially the smaller ones near urban centers, there is a failure to weed and thin sylvan gardens. Too often there is a failure to address the diversity of weeds. The list of common weeds, most of which are non-native that we have introduced from foreign places, is long.

You might know or recognize some of these invaders: multiflora rose, privets, bush and Japanese honeysuckle, tree of heaven, garlic mustard, autumn and Russian olive, Oriental bittersweet, Japanese stiltgrass. There are many more. So, why work at weeding them from the woods? Simply, these plants are very competitive and displace native species. While they provide a sense of health with their green leaves and often abundant fruit, they provide little support to native woodland species. Sure, birds feast on the fruit, but few insects eat the leaves. A complex cycle needed to help nesting birds to fledge their young, which depend on insect protein, is partially broken.



This story of species interdependence is complex and it extends across landscapes, from your backyard to your neighbors, to the woods, and beyond. It is not necessarily fully understood by even those who study and research such things. Nonetheless, if you own land -- lawn, fields, or woods -- there is much to learn. To help you and others learn more about your role in managing our land and woods, a second edition of *The Woods in Your Backyard: Learning to Create and Enhance Natural Areas Around Your Home* has just been released. This 108-page, spiral-bound book, with a forward by Doug Tallamy, who is nationally known for his work on the interaction of native plants, insects, and birds, can help you develop a plan to manage the land you care for.

To purchase your copy of *The Woods in Your Backyard* written by faculty at Penn State, University of Maryland, and Virginia Tech, visit <http://palspublishing.cals.cornell.edu> or call 607-255-7654.

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