

ANNUAL REPORT

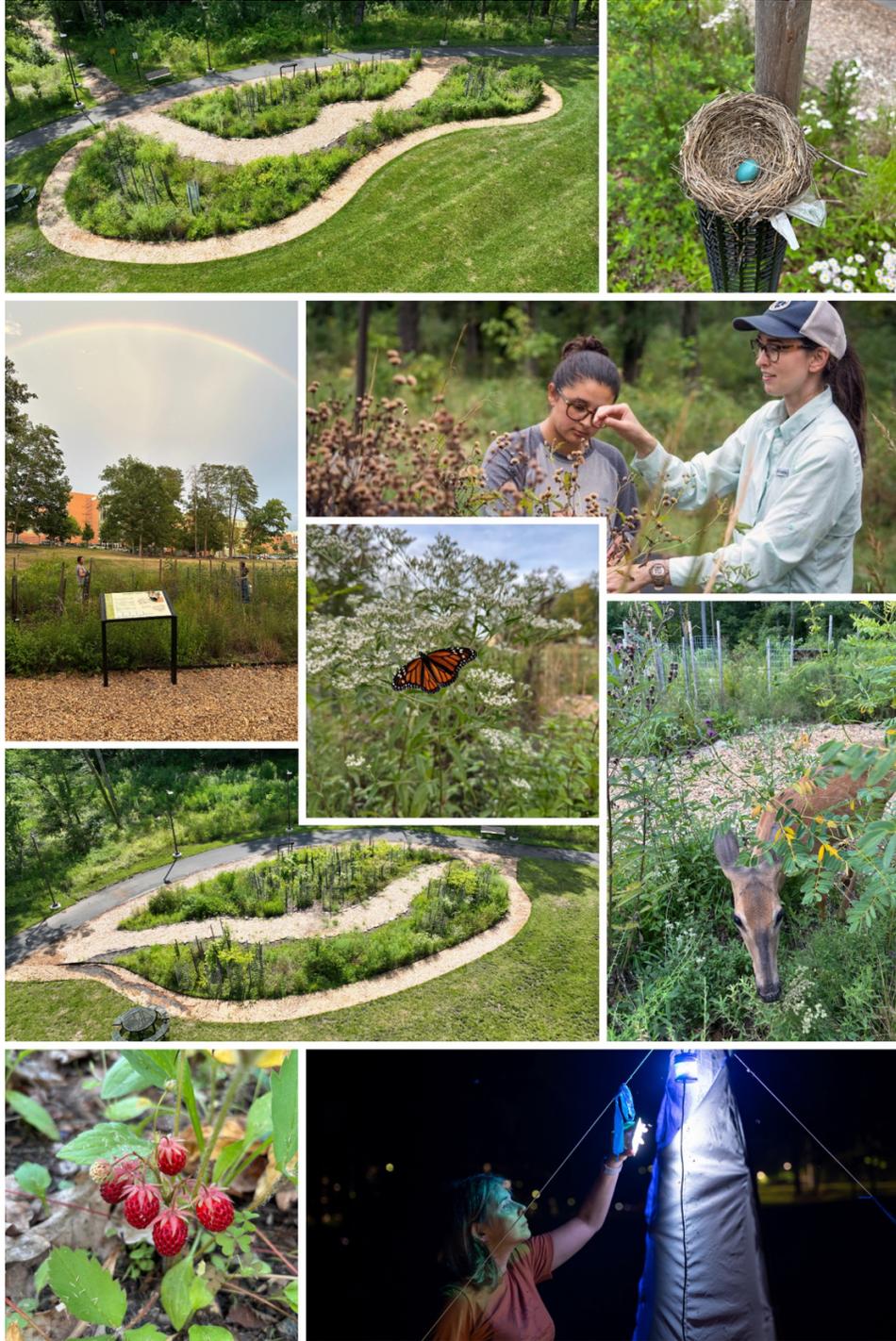


Photo credits: Evan Cantwell/Office of Sustainability, Ayman Rashid & George Mason University Police UAS Unit

VISION

Communities driving resilient, local food production using ecologically-enriching & life-sustaining practices.

MISSION

To develop a replicable model for advancing food security, ecosystem services & sustainability learning.

ABOUT THE FORAGERS' FOREST

The Foragers' Forest is a **native food forest** established in Fall 2023 on George Mason University's Fairfax campus. The project was launched by Sarah Roth (MS 2024), Greenhouse & Gardens Program Manager Doni Nolan (PhD candidate), and Environmental Science & Policy Professor Dr. Dann Sklarew (PhD 2000). This project served as Sarah's master's project for her environmental science and policy degree program.

The project involved planting nearly 2,000 native plants (representing ~60 species) across 5,300 square feet. What sets it apart from other food forests is our commitment to **restoring wildlife habitat**. All of our plants are native to Fairfax County, thus providing the most benefit to local wildlife.

What's more, Virginia has a rich diversity of edible native plants. Our groves include delectable favorites like **wild strawberries, blueberries, American hazelnuts, and American persimmons**.

Our planting style – evident in the tightly planted clusters of trees and shrubs – is adapted from a **reforestation method** developed by Japanese ecologist Dr. Akira Miyawaki. He found that close planting led to faster tree growth, quicker canopy closure, and higher tree survival rates compared to plantation-style planting.

INTERESTED IN TOURING THE FORAGERS' FOREST?

Email **Dr. Dann Sklarew** (dsklarew@gmu.edu)
and **Doni Nolan** (dnolan6@gmu.edu) with your
request.

YEAR 2 HIGHLIGHTS

SITE DEVELOPMENT & STEWARDSHIP



We installed educational signage. The Foragers' Forest now features interpretive panel signs describing key aspects of the site, including edible plants and wildlife connections. We also installed signs reminding visitors to stay on established trails when the ground is wet – an important step in our efforts to restore soil health.

We installed stone borders along the trails. Together with volunteers, we moved 3,200 pounds of stone to line the trails in each grove. In addition to its aesthetic value, the stone border helps staff and volunteers identify meadow edges to aid in maintenance work.

We also replenished wood chips along trails and inside planted areas.



Volunteers celebrate finishing the stone borders at the site.

LEARNING, SERVICE & OUTREACH



Volunteers removing a large hedge of invasive rose along the stream.

We engaged the George Mason University community in the science & practice of land management. We worked with over 90 volunteers to weed out invasive plants and conduct a nighttime bioblitz (more about the bioblitz in the *Science* section). This amounted to over 30 hours of hands-on learning. A highlight of our invasive plant management work was removing a large hedge of invasive multiflora rose growing in the streamside forest across from the Woodland Grove. Removing this mature seed source helped protect the Foragers' Forest from the encroachment of invasive plants. Special thanks to the Fairfax Master Naturalists who put in many hours of weeding in this first year since the Foragers' Forest was approved as a service hours-eligible site.

We developed a guide for quick field identification of plants in the Foragers' Forest. With nearly 60 plant species represented at the site, it can be challenging to identify all of the different plants at their various stages of growth. Proper identification, however, is critical to make sure we're weeding out invasive plants and supporting desirable ones. We worked with a student intern to develop a visual identification guide for staff and volunteers to use at the site.



An image of the Foragers' Forest simulation in Planet Zoo.
Image credit: Dr. Alice Fox

We worked with George Mason University professors to incorporate the Foragers' Forest in their teaching and research. At least 65 students engaged with the site in an educational capacity in 2025.

- Dr. Stephanie Schmidt's *Ecosphere: Environmental Science II* class collected tree measurements for more than 50 tree saplings to compare year-over year growth. This is the second year of tree growth data collected at the site.
- Dr. Cindy Smith's *Environmental Science: Biomes & Human Dimensions* class used the site to observe and measure insect and plant diversity.
- Dr. Emily Conway brought her *Plants of Virginia* class to tour the Foragers' Forest. The group explored native plants and the restoration approaches used to develop the site.
- Dr. Natalie Howe's *Mushrooms, Molds, and Society* class visited the site with forest bathing guide and Virginia Master Naturalist Ana Ka'ahanui.
- Dr. Dann Sklarew's *Ecological Rehabilitation Practicum* class tracked plant phenology (e.g., timing related to leaf bud-break, flowering, and fruiting) at the site, contributing to nationwide research collected through the USA National Phenology Network.
- Dr. Alice Fox created simulations of the Foragers' Forest in the video game Planet Zoo to preview what the groves may look like in future years.



Howard University's Halo GREEN Garden Club with George Mason University's Dr. Jennifer Sklarew, Dr. Dann Sklarew & Sarah Roth.

We hosted Howard University students for a tour of the Foragers' Forest. These students steward Howard University's Halo GREEN Garden, and were interested in learning about the food plants and wildlife found in the Foragers' Forest. We concluded the tour by collecting seeds the students could take and grow for their campus garden. Many thanks to the Halo GREEN Garden group and their advisors (Dr. Lemir Teron, Dr. Janelle Burke, and Dr. Kweli Zukeri) for organizing this visit!

We contributed seeds to George Mason University's Seed Library. Sarah collected, cleaned, and sorted dozens of packets of seeds from the Foragers' Forest for donation to the seed library. The seed packets "sold out" within a couple of weeks – demonstrating the high demand for local native seeds.

We led a tour of the Foragers' Forest for Fairfax County Government's *Fairfax Employees for Environmental Excellence (FEEE)* group.

SCIENCE & RESEARCH



A bioblitz participant observing a moth under the blacklight.
Photo credit: Ayman Rashid

We conducted a bioblitz to inventory moth species on campus. Sarah and Carsyn Bennett (ESP master’s student) organized a nighttime bioblitz with black lights to inventory the moth species present near the Foragers’ Forest. Over 30 volunteers participated in the effort, including Fairfax Master Naturalists who brought their own blacklighting equipment. We recorded 39 moth species. You can read more about the event in this [College of Science article](#). We thank George Mason University Facilities and Campus Operations and the George Mason University Police Department for supporting this event!

We tagged trees to better track their health. We installed numbered forestry tags for each of 68 trees planted in the Foragers’ Forest. This will help organize data collection on tree health and growth in the future.



Aerial photo of the Foragers’ Forest Thicket Grove.
Photo credit: George Mason University Police UAS Unit

We worked with the George Mason University Police UAS Unit to capture aerial photos. Aerial photos capture a bird’s eye view of the site. This first set of images sets a baseline within the first two years of the planting. Future images will help us visualize how the forest is growing in over time.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Beyond the metrics, we heard again and again – from students, staff, and community members – about how the Foragers’ Forest inspires and serves as a peaceful oasis on campus.

“I find the placards very informative, the atmosphere calming, and the idea of an increasingly active (and interactive) natural environment taking shape in the middle of campus inspiring.”

- **Dr. Rick Davis, Dean, Center for Visual and Performing Arts**

“I personally enjoy the insect and flower diversity.”

- **Dr. Cindy Smith, Environmental Science & Policy Professor**

“I had the opportunity to learn more about the Miyawaki planting method, and I have continued to learn more about it to implement on my small farm.”

- **Dr. Alice Fox, Community Engagement Specialist**

FUTURE WORK (YEAR 3+)

Continue to nurture the health of this young food forest

- Monitor water and nutrient requirements
- Conduct regular weeding
- Monitor deer impacts and other threats to the site
- Explore changes to the outer edge pathways to address stormwater erosion

Expand educational opportunities

- Lead “Forage to Fork” events showcasing edible favorites
- Collaborate with George Mason University professors to develop a monitoring program to annually collect baseline data on ecological health
- Engage professors to incorporate the site into diverse curriculum offerings, including in the sciences and humanities

Grow community outreach

- Engage individuals, community organizations, learning institutions, and local governments to explore and replicate the Foragers’ Forest

THANK YOU TO OUR FUNDERS & SUPPORTERS

Amazon Web Services, George Mason University Facilities & Campus Operations, George Mason University’s College of Science, George Mason University’s Patriot Green Fund, George Mason University’s Institute for a Sustainable Earth, The American Chestnut Foundation