



SAVANNA RESTORATION

Each of these elements, although itself a separate entity, depends directly or indirectly upon the other elements for its existence.

—Samuel A. Graham, 1929

What is a savanna?

Years ago, Southeastern Michigan was covered with savannas—open woodlands with grassy understories. Today, few savannas remain in Michigan. As part of the Sam Graham Trees project, we hope to give you the opportunity to experience a historic oak savanna right here at the Matthaei Botanical Gardens.

Where will we find this restored savanna?

We are restoring/recreating oak savannas on the upland area near the Helen V. Smith Woodland Wildflower Garden.

What was growing there previously?

Previously you saw European grasses, spruces and pines from Colorado, Austria and Switzerland, invasive plants such as buckthorn and honeysuckle, and remnants of plant genetics projects from the 1960's. This exotic and random combination of cultivated plants makes no sense in a Michigan savanna.

What steps are we taking to restore the savannas?

We burned the area in early May to control European grasses and to prepare the soil for planting. After the burn, we planted numerous plugs of prairie plants—little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), prairie dock (*Silphium sp.*), and false sunflower (*Helianthus helianthoides*) to name a just a few...

To encourage the savanna canopy, we have planted bur, black, red and white oaks. If you hike out on the trail you will see these oak saplings growing out of tree tubes. These tubes protect the young trees from deer browsing and improve the chances that they will mature into large, beautiful oaks.



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Finally, in the next few weeks the staff will be removing many of the exotic spruces and pines. These removals will help restore ecological balance to this site. Additionally, these removals will enable staff to manage this site ecologically through the use of fire.

Why do savannas need fire?

Fire is an essential part of a savanna ecosystem. Fire stimulates growth in the prairie grasses and opens space between the oaks. Without fire, woodland trees can enter and grow into dense stands, shading out the grasses and forbs. After a century without fire, a savanna is no longer a savanna—it is a forest!

Why are savannas important?

In Michigan, savannas are the ecological link between our forests and prairies. Numerous plant and animal species make their homes in savannas. Since savannas have high biodiversity—a wide variety of living things—they are a vital piece of the ecosystem puzzle.

We hope that you enjoy witnessing the return of this historic ecosystem!



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