

OCPT/WV Division of Forestry Intern Program for Tree Maintenance.

Opequon Creek Project Team (OCPT) has, as one of its goals, organizing and participating in riparian buffer plantings within the Opequon Creek watershed. Many other organizations in the Eastern Panhandle of WV (Potomac Valley Audubon, City of Ranson, City of Martinsburg, WV Division of Forestry, Cacapon Institute) have had similar plantings both within the Opequon Creek watershed as well as in surrounding areas. Years of experience and observation have led us to make changes in our planting techniques, most notably the change from large numbers of bare root plantings to a smaller number of larger container plants. With the smaller number of plants, all of them are now staked and caged or "tubed" in order to protect them from deer browsing. However, we still have had extensive mortality in these plantings which concerns us. The most common factor in survival, based on observation, has been the ability of the landowner to maintain the planting for a few years while the plants get established. Many do not have the time or equipment to properly maintain and water the plantings during the hot summer months.

In 2013, OCPT set out to resolve this problem. The proposed solution was to be to hire a summer intern to provide maintenance to the plantings, with priority being placed on the newest plantings. Our biggest hurdle was the lack of infrastructure to hire and supervise this intern. We reached out to Herb Peddicord, watershed forester for the WV Division of Forestry (WVD OF) to see if he could help. Herb obtained permission from his agency to hire and supervise the intern under WVD OF summer workers program, but OCPT had to fund the salary. OCPT pooled funds from the Stream Partners Grant, the AGO grant from West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection and our general fund to provide most of the salary and incidental expenses for the intern. The WVD OF was able to apply some funds from one of their Bay Implementation Grants to complete the salary funding requirement. The WVD OF also provided the intern with a State vehicle to use for the summer. That was an unexpected bonus and, given the size of the water tank the intern used, it was necessary. Because the intern was considered a State employee, all of the overhead costs of the intern were covered by the State of WV; insurance, workers comp, payroll etc.

The WVD OF was able to find two local part time interns to work for the summer. The interns primarily worked as a team tasked with the following items:

- 1) Water the newer plantings as required based on the weather and rainfall.
- 2) Weed control around existing plants to free them from competition.
- 3) Replace deer barriers as needed. This included tubes and stakes as well as exclusion fence.
- 4) Replace trees as needed.
- 5) Document each planting that they worked on for survival and condition.

During the summer the interns, with assistance from OCPT volunteers as needed, went to many of the plantings in the Eastern Panhandle and worked diligently, giving the plants the care they needed. One of the most important aspects of their work was the last one on the list, documentation. As much of the information we based our proposal for an intern on was observational, we felt that it was very important to start a documented baseline on the condition of the plantings so that we could prove, as we move forward, that the extra maintenance was indeed helping the survival of the plantings.

OCPT feels that the intern program will increase the survival of plantings in the eastern panhandle of WV. We are going to try to replicate the program in 2015 if we can identify a source for the needed funds and the State of WV is willing to again partner with us. We would also like to thank Herb Peddicord and the WVD OF for all their help in making the intern program a possibility in 2014.