The Woods in Your Backyard
Learning to Create and Enhance Natural Areas Around Your Home
2nd Edition
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Disclaimer
This guide covers issues related to the natural parts of your land: areas that are currently forested; areas that you don’t mow, which may be covered with small trees, shrubs, and/or tall grass; wetland and waterside areas; and mowed areas that you want to convert into forest. The manual does not address areas you plan to continue to mow.

Neither the authors nor their affiliated universities guarantee or warrant recommendations or products mentioned in this manual. Use of a product name does not imply endorsement of the product to the exclusion of others that may be suitable. Web site addresses listed in this manual were current as of September 2015, but due to the changing nature of the World Wide Web, some addresses may no longer be active.

Herbicide/Pesticide Precautionary Statement
Herbicides and pesticides used improperly can be injurious to humans, animals, and plants. Follow label directions and heed all precautions on the label. Store all such chemicals in original containers and out of reach of children.
About the Authors

Jonathan Kays is a University of Maryland extension specialist in natural resources with statewide responsibility for programs in the areas of woodland stewardship, wildlife damage management, natural resource income opportunities, and wood energy. This guide is partially based on his personal experience of transforming his 3-acre residential lot from a cornfield to a “woods in his backyard” over the course of 23 years. He is also the owner of 230 acres of forestland in West Virginia that he manages using sustainable forestry practices. Information on his integrated extension and research education program can be found at HTTP://EXTENSION.UMD.EDU/WOODLAND.

Adam K. Downing is an extension Agent serving 28 counties in Virginia’s Northern Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley with forestry & natural resources programming. In addition to a B.S. in forestry from Purdue University and a Master’s in forest resources from Penn State, Adam has practical field experience from a rural upbringing and field-work in Indiana, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Kenya (where he was an Agro-forestry Peace Corps Volunteer). He and his family lived on a 4.5 acre wooded lot for 13 years where they used the principles in this book to transform their “backyard woods” to meet their interests. The Downings now live on less than an acre near Charlottesville, VA where they continue to apply sustainability and resource management principles.

James Finley is the Ibberson Professor of Forest Resource Management, Director of the Center for Private Forests at Penn State, and extension forester at Penn State University. His extension interest focuses on private forestland management and forest sustainability. Extension audiences for his work include private forest owners, loggers, foresters, the forest industry, and the public. To improve outreach programs, his research explores the human dimensions of natural resources — people and the land — and forest management. Jim and his wife, Linda, own and manage 280 acres of forestland in north-central Pennsylvania and have a suburban woodlot of nearly two acres where they strive to invite wildlife to share their property.

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There is no time to beat around the bush: we must rebuild the woodland network we have destroyed and responsibly manage the fragments that remain. We need to do this now—not tomorrow, not next year—because we so desperately need what woodlands give us. And private landowners are ideally positioned, both geographically and financially, to take the lead in this endeavor.

In the last two centuries, our nation’s forests have been heavily exploited, first for lumber and fuel to build our nation and then by a more permanent elimination, as woodlands were cleared for development. We’ve learned a lot in the past century as the profession of forestry has matured, and many forests are now managed for multiple goods and services such as timber and wildlife diversity. The state of the life around us is now of greater concern.

Today, land use is increasingly shifting to developed areas; woodlands and fields that once provided timber, agricultural crops, and habitat are rapidly being lost to urban and suburban sprawl. The increasing rate at which we are losing our woodlands, their resident wildlife, and all of the ecological services they provide for us has made informed woodland management on private property more important than ever. Fortunately, we now know that woodland management need not be an “either/or” choice. You can manage the trees on your land for both wood products and biodiversity, if that is your goal—or simply to coax as much life, and thus ecosystem function and enjoyment, from your property as possible, no matter the size of your ownership.

We need a new perspective about the role of our woodlands because the inextricable links between forest health, biodiversity, ecosystem function, and human wellbeing are not yet part of our national consciousness. Quite simply, it is woodlands that produce most of the living things that constitute nature in the eastern United States, and it is this biodiversity that runs our ecosystems. Whether or not you enjoy the natural world, this is important to you because it is the diversity of the plants and animals around you that provides the life-giving services that support us all. It is biodiversity that produces the oxygen we breathe, cleans and stores our fresh water, sequesters carbon, builds and stabilizes topsoil, moderates severe weather, and protects our watersheds. It is biodiversity that shades us in the hot summer months and protects us from bitter winds in the winter; and it is biodiversity that disperses seeds from parent plants, provides free pest control, and pollinates 80% of the plants on earth, including most of our crops.

Technology will never replace our reliance on these vital services, and so, for our own sake, we must be good stewards of the landscapes that produce them. Plants reign supreme among the life forms that provide ecosystem services, and native trees (those with which local animals have coevolved) provide more services than shrubs or herbaceous plants. In fact, trees are so important...
The *Woods in Your Backyard* was developed with cooperation from these organizations.