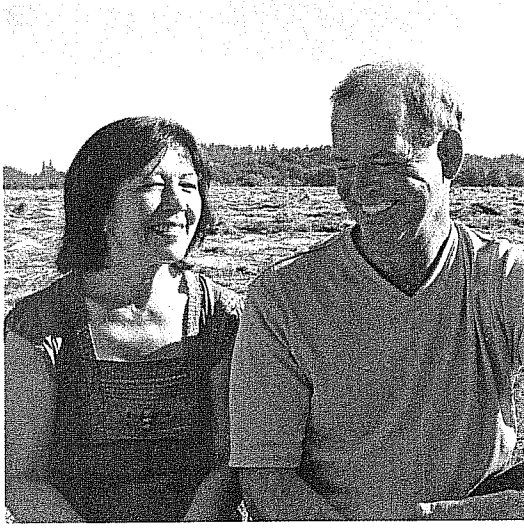


LYNDA BOYER

through the waving grasses as dozens of small dramas unravel in the dappled light and shadows. Clusters of spindly herbs draw life from a thin blanket of soil that barely covers an oak's shallow roots. Bees and butterflies duck and swoop in the sunlit prairie grass, riffling beyond a proscenium of sinewy, lichen-draped branches. A woodpecker whittles away at a bony snag. Beneath her low-brimmed hat, Lynda's eyes survey every inch like spotlights, until, without warning, she shrieks and falls to her knees. "Oh, hello babies!" she coos, bringing her tanned face within kissing distance of a cluster of homely purple flowers punching through the cracked earth. They are Willamette daisies—a few of a dwindling number native to our narrow valley. And for Lynda, they represent one hard-won success in her ongoing efforts to bring a 10,000-year-old landscape back to life.

This 388-acre patch of sprawling grassland, just east of I-5 as it dips below Salem, contains one of the largest private oak savanna restoration projects in Oregon. It belongs to Mark and Jolly Krautmann, the proprietors of Heritage Seedlings Inc—a nearby nursery specializing in unusual trees and shrubs. The two horticulturalists met while studying soil science at Texas A&M University and moved to Salem in 1978, quickly becoming fascinated with Oregon's burgeoning "boutique agricultural scene." Between 1981 and 1986, their



The vast canopy of a healthy, uncrowded Oregon white oak provides crucial food and habitat for countless native species, from insects and woodpeckers to squirrels and deer.

Mark and Jolly Krautmann, owners of Heritage Seedlings, are using 185 acres of their land to provide an ambitious model of stewardship for private landowners across the state.



Native plant biologist Lynda Boyer has turned the Krautmanns' acreage into one of the largest private oak savanna restoration projects in Oregon. "None of this became feasible until we hired Lynda," says Mark. "Her passion drove this thing."

fledgling business grew from pots on their back porch into 20 acres of land outside of Salem. They proved their mettle propagating unusual plants like *Stewartia* and katsura tree and continued to expand their nursery, adding 102 more acres in 1992.

"The restoration part was almost incidental in its origins," Mark recalls. "I found Lynda scouting for wild seed sources on our farm—she didn't realize it was private property." By 2001, he and Jolly had hired that trespassing botanist to revive their 25-acre patch of former sheep pasture into oak savanna—a vibrant but endangered ecosystem made up of vast expanses of wild native grasses dotted with towering Oregon white oaks. In 2004, they bought Jefferson Farm, which included 50 acres of rare intact savanna. "We bought it because we loved it; we just loved those big trees," says Mark, who is now often referred to as the "oak maniac" by locals. Under Lynda's effervescent management, the Krautmanns are using both properties to showcase the Willamette Valley's unique suite of native plants and wildlife. "The goal," says Lynda, "is to enhance what was already here."

Just 150 years ago, the Willamette Valley was covered in a rich mosaic of oak prairie and savanna, but arriving pioneers didn't appreciate its charm. "The country had an uninviting look, from the fact that it had been overrun

by fire, which had destroyed all the vegetation except for the oak trees, which appeared not to be injured," wrote explorer Charles Wilkes in 1841. But what the pioneers saw as a natural tragedy was the native peoples' response to climate change. Archaeological records show that about 5,000 years ago, this once arid valley quickly turned lush, the moisture bringing what the region's Kalapuya Indians considered undesirable plants: shrubs and aggressive conifers like the Douglas fir. They responded with yearly burns to bring back the flowers, grasses, and trees that provided their food, shelter, and hunting grounds. It was a managed ecosystem, but a truly dynamic one—over 200 species of native birds, bees, butterflies, and critters depended on it.

The arriving Euro-American settlers put an end to those seasonal fires, allowing dense conifer forests to creep into the valley. They introduced, both intentionally and accidentally, new invasive species such as Himalayan blackberry and false brome. Today, with less than 1 percent of the Willamette Valley's native prairie remaining, and over 95 percent of the valley's land under private ownership, the future of these habitats looks bleak. But Lynda and the Krautmanns are providing a rare model of stewardship. Lynda's tenacious curiosity is matched by her contagious passion for plant biology; to fund the restoration, she's managed to secure over \$240,000 in state and

federal grants from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, and other agencies. Students from various schools and environmental organizations visit Jefferson Farm to learn about habitat restoration and to plant trees, sedges, and flowers. And the on-site tours Lynda hosts regularly attract swarms of fellow landowners and biologists alike. "The more we learn, the more we realize we don't know," Mark says. "So we want to use our property as a forum for trials—we want to note our processes, share our results, and demonstrate to other private landowners that we have a very, very important role to play in conservation."

Lynda's goal is to get a total of 31,000 threatened and endangered plants in the ground within the next five years. She estimates they've planted only 10,000 so far, but she's optimistic. "Obviously not everything you plant is going to survive with the competition," she says. "My mantra is this: there are more natives here now than there were before, in abundance and richness. It's tipping the balance so we have populations that are self-sustaining." She has systematically removed Douglas firs and thinned out crowded clusters of oaks to allow their branches to grow unrestrained, crowned by bunches of acorns for squirrels and deer to feed on. Where thickets of Himalayan blackberry or stubborn tracts of Scotch broom lurk, she tills, mows, or carefully sprays herbicide before planting new seeds. Lynda and the Krautmans have also borrowed a page from the Kalapuyas' savanna management plan, burning sections of their property each year since 2003. But modern society makes burns at Jefferson Farm complicated: winds must be low and southwesterly (so that flames don't spill into the neighbors' property) and air quality must be high. Last year, a regional burn ban thwarted the annual ritual.

Ten years ago, the only way to get your hands on a native wildflower



The nursery's wild-seed production areas provide native grasses, sedges, and wildflowers (like this late-blooming annual prairie species, Clarkia amoena) for similar savanna restoration projects across Oregon.

seed was to find one and propagate it yourself. But Lynda's successful treasure hunts have spawned a new cottage industry. Now, with more than a hundred species of native grasses, sedges, rushes, and wildflowers growing on 25 acres of the Krautmans' land, Heritage Seedlings is providing the seeds for restoration projects across the state. Local watershed councils have started running workshops to teach landowners how to manage habitat on their property. Horticulturalists are taking notice as well, hoping that Oregon's hordes of avid gardeners will begin to understand "native" as more than a style or a marketing slogan. "If you asked the majority of Portland residents what a native plant is, they wouldn't know," says Sean Hogan, a cofounder of Cistus Nursery on Sauvie Island. "There's such a wonder in these habitats—they are part of our heritage, and it's important not only to restore them but to go out and see them."

Back on Jefferson Farm, Mark, Jolly, and Lynda are crossing their fingers that funding keeps coming, nursery sales stay steady, and poor air quality doesn't cause another September burn ban. And while Lynda is particularly anxious to watch the Willamette Valley larkspur she planted—an elusive "species of concern" and the subject of her graduate thesis—bloom this spring, Mark takes a longer view of the trio's efforts. "Our name is on the title and the water rights, but our lifetime is so short," he says. "What I keep asking myself is, 'Did you leave the land better than you found it? Did you leave an example for those people who will follow to leave the land better than it was when they found it?' If the answer is yes, I think we'll be all right."

LEND A HAND

Most of us don't have remnants of oak savanna in our backyards, but we still have a vital role to play in the stewardship of the region.

These organizations offer all kinds of opportunities to help preserve imperiled habitats like oak savanna while experiencing their beauty firsthand:

Three Rivers Land Conservancy (trlc.org/volunteer)

Oregon Chapter of the Nature Conservancy (nature.org)

Xerces Society (xerces.org)

SOLV (solv.org)

Visit the National Wildlife Federation's website at nwf.org/backyard to learn how to create habitat for native species in your own backyard.

Visit Heritage Seedlings' website at heritageseedlings.com/stewardship.htm to learn more about their ongoing restoration work.