

Like Johnny Appleseed, but with conifers

By Carol C. Bradley

“He’s like Johnny Appleseed, but with conifers,” says 8th grade history teacher Diana Greenwood, of American Studies professor Thomas J. Schlereth.

Greenwood, who teaches at John Young Middle School in Mishawaka, took Schlereth’s seminar “Nature in America” through Notre Dame’s Teachers as Scholars program, a

professional development program for K–12 teachers in the region.

Schlereth, who’s been a member of the faculty for 35 years, has had a lifelong interest in trees and arboriculture—he learned to graft and start trees from root cuttings as a boy, through a Pennsylvania Department of Forestry correspondence course.

His interest in trees has informed his scholarly research as well—his book “Keepers of Trees: A Cultural History of North American Arboreta

1700–2000” will be published jointly by the University of Chicago Press and the Center for American Places in 2010.

Schlereth took his “Nature in America” students to visit his 33.5-acre farmstead in Granger, and many of the teachers came away with starts of trees and other plants from his greenhouse and gardens.

Greenwood also came away with the idea of creating an outdoor learning laboratory for students at her school.

“I thought it was a great chance to take advantage of Tom’s expertise,” Greenwood says.

“I jumped at the opportunity to have a go,” Schlereth adds.

Two years later, the idea has become a reality. Schlereth designed a series of gardens for the school, including a winter garden and a mini-arboretum to facilitate the study of trees. About two-thirds of the trees for the project were dug and transplanted from Schlereth’s property—others were purchased from nurseries.

Schlereth and Greenwood planned a row of sentry trees along an otherwise blank brick wall to allow students to study basic tree morphology. Plantings include arborvitae ‘Degroot’s Spire,’ Alaskan yellow cedar, and a tiger-tail spruce. “The kids named it Bob,” Schlereth says. “It’s very Dr. Seussian.”

Other unusual specimens include

the metasequoia, a plant known in the fossil record but thought to be extinct until 1941. “A living specimen was discovered by a Chinese forester, then it spread through the horticultural world. What’s nice is that it grows well and easily in Indiana,” Schlereth says. “We tried to select species that can have a degree of neglect in the Northern Indiana summer.”

The learning lab is already seeing quite a bit of use, Greenwood says. “The science department is planning on using it for experiments, the math department to study probability. The English department will be doing nature writing, and the art department nature drawing.”

In 25 or 30 years when the gardens are fully mature, Greenwood says, “We hope today’s students will come back and visit with their own children.”



John Young Middle School students Tyler Matson, rear, and Brandon Evans plant a Japanese maple tree in an outdoor learning laboratory conceived by 8th-grade history teacher Diana Greenwood and American studies professor Tom Schlereth.

Photo by Carol C. Bradley