

Volunteers help restore native wilderness to Brush Creek

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Grass along Brush Creek for blocks east of the Country Club Plaza stands neatly mowed like a golf course.

That's a good thing, right?

Larry O'Donnell shrugged at the question Saturday morning as he stood in the shade of a grove of cottonwood trees.

"Sure isn't natural," he said.

O'Donnell and a bunch of other volunteers took the morning to take a stretch of the creek back to how it may have appeared to explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark two centuries earlier. The volunteers planted native trees, shrubs and grasses along the bank and on an island-like piece of high ground surrounded by an oxbow, a loop formed by the creek.

The Brush Creek Oxbow Project, just west of Benton Boulevard, drew help from about a dozen urban students, some of whom never had dug a hole before.

"This is my first time planting anything," Keylen Madge, 15, said as he put a beautyberry bush in the ground. "We'll see how it goes. I'm hoping for the best."

Green Works coordinated the project. The nonprofit environmental group works with the students at the Brush Creek Community Center.

The Missouri Department of Conservation, the Kansas City Parks and Recreation Department and engineering firm Burns & McDonnell also helped with Saturday's event. The goal was to improve scenery, reduce erosion and provide a natural habitat for wildlife, such as songbirds.

Aptly named volunteer planter Randy Root of Burns & McDonnell thought the day might get rained out when he awoke at 4 a.m. to a downpour at his Olathe home. But by midmorning, the sky had turned blue and the sun shined brightly.

The group would plant 76 trees and 100 shrubs — with money provided by a \$25,000 National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Five Star Restoration Grant.

The shade will cut down on algae in the creek.

"Why do you stomp down the dirt?" Felix Maull, 14, asked O'Donnell as he showed the students how to plant a nannyberry bush.

“To get rid of the air pockets,” O’Donnell, of the Little Blue River Watershed Coalition, told them. “Roots don’t like air pockets.”

Soon, Felix planted a few bushes of his own, mindful to get rid of those air pockets. He knew that a lot of people his age were still in bed on a Saturday morning.

“But this is for a good cause, for the ecosystem,” he said. “I can come back here years from now and these bushes will be big.

“I can look at them and say, ‘I did that.’ ”



Volunteers worked Saturday to return some wildlife habitat to Brush Creek. Jesse Chapman (left) and Tatiana Williams, 13, dug a hole for a bush as Keylen Madge (background center), 15, filled in dirt around another.