

## **Benign Neglect or Thoughtful Intervention**

### **AGRI-VIEWS**

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Landowners are often faced with the challenges of managing the vegetation on their land. It doesn't matter whether it's 5,000 square feet of yard in an urban residential lot or 1,000 acres of cropland, pasture, or timber. The manager still has to determine what they are going to do with it. The end result, at any given point in time, is going to be greatly influenced by how much and what that land manager did or didn't do.

There is a concept known as benign neglect that has been applied to many different things including ecosystem management. Benign neglect, in the instance of land management, implies that by humans NOT interfering, an ecosystem will develop some sort of "steady state". Of course we have to understand that it may take a century or two of doing nothing to reach what is known as climax vegetation.

As humans we are blessed and cursed with logic and problem solving skills. I say cursed because we tend to start to believe that with these highly intelligent human brains, we can know better than Mother Nature what needs to be done. We have seen it all the time. It was decided that fire was bad for forests so extreme efforts were made to put out every single forest fire. Then we finally realized that fire is a natural and necessary part of virtually any terrestrial plant based ecosystem. We'll probably spend the next century undoing that blunder!

Benign neglect in some ways is the polar opposite of the heavily managed landscape that many of us have in our yards. We landscape our yards to some sort of ideal that we have imagined that sadly tends to be filled with non-native plants that are either way out of place or non-native plants that are so well adapted they'll out compete everything else. I really think that many of us need to spend more time somewhere between the two extremes of benign neglect and heavily managed. A concept I've heard called, thoughtful intervention.

Thoughtful intervention leans more towards benign neglect but we step in and tweak when we need to in an effort to prevent train wrecks. Thoughtful intervention would have allowed many of those 20<sup>th</sup> century forest fires to burn and humans would only step in when buildings were at risk. Then, after the fire is over, steps would be taken to create a zone around those buildings that would make them less susceptible to wildfires.

Instead of trying to maintain all five or ten acres of your rural landscape as a mowed lawn, why not establish a few thousand square foot area around the house as turfgrass that is mowed and maintained but the rest of the acreage is allowed to be a more natural prairie area that is not heavily mowed. Perhaps we plant some of that area back to native grasses and wildflowers. Let's create some pollinator habitat with nectar and larval food plants and maybe take one corner and plant it to native shrubs that are wildlife beneficial.

Thoughtful intervention encourages working WITH the natural world rather than trying to conquer the natural world. There is a price that goes with thoughtful intervention. That price is called learning, often life long learning. We learn to observe what is going on, we learn when we need to tweak and we learn when we need to leave things well enough alone. Humans have big egos and it is sometimes hard to accept that often mother nature doesn't need our help!

As I just said, it is a life long process of learning and understanding. We didn't get where we are today overnight and it will take time to reverse some of that process as we learn to be thoughtful observers and interveners!