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On-ramps

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Under the raked-back mulch, this little patch of ramps is slowly expanding — note the sprout with exposed roots beside another one from an established bulb. The oldest might flower this year. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

The real estate saw that a property's value is in three things — “location, location, location” — applies even more to woodland perennials. Perennials won't perennialize if they aren't in the right conditions. Sometimes these circumstances involve intangibles that prevent establishment.

Intangible blockades are fewer if you're planting native perennials, which take advantage of existing relationships with regional insects, fungi and pollinators. A settled native perennial can signpost the prospects for a foreign perennial.

I took a chance on planting ramps because South Sound, like much of the United States, hosts the Nodding Onion (*Allium cernuum*). Wild leeks, or ramps, are in the same genus *Allium*. Annual alliums generally thrive in Washington, from the onions of Eastern Washington to the garlic that needs so little care in the west.

My general strategy for planting woodland perennials has been to study their native conditions and then plant a large number of young ones divided into groups across sites approximating those conditions. You might lose most of them, but the ones that take will determine where you plant the next round.

As that second round matures and provides propagation stock, the foreign perennial is adjusting to the conditions of your site. Six years later, when you plant only from the propagules you raised, they will have a better chance of survival in other area microclimates than the parent material that once arrived in the mail from West Virginia.

A lot of this comes down to proper observation, like the first principle of permaculture: observe and interact. And planning from successful plantings embodies the fourth principle of permaculture: apply self-regulation and feedback.

Slug pressure on the moist forest floor was brutal. I felt that if the perennials didn't have the wherewithal to stand up for themselves, they didn't belong there. Pursuant to permaculture's eighth dictum, “Integrate, don't segregate,” I wanted to fit the ramps into existing ecological relationships, not wall them off in a forest plantation.

I had all but forgotten my benighted ramps when last year, two years after planting, I saw some anomalous foliage springing from a litter layer sparsely sprinkled with native blackberry. Broad and standing blades are hard to miss, and sure enough, the ramps had taken hold — even spread a little, as they divide from bulbs like garlic.

I fed them some compost and sprinkled them with a layer of crushed eggshells to deter slugs. I later added a bunker full of Sluggo buried under hardware cloth with a heavy rock weight. That's putting one's thumb on the scale, but once any plant has acclimated completely, it shouldn't need such protections, and neither will its scions.

A couple of days ago, I scraped away some mulch, compost and eggshells to see how the ramps are doing. They're quietly dividing, despite losing their foliage to slugs by summertime.

That's their native schedule anyway — a spring ephemeral, they leap up before the trees around them have leafed out. They hoard sunlight from this period into their bulbs and lose their leaves by the time spring is in full swing. After a couple of years, they might start flowering and setting seed.

Propagating ramps is a valuable ecological service. Endangered by the careless enthusiasm of wildcrafters and chefs, they are overharvested in their native range (from South Carolina to Canada, and as far west as Iowa).

They prefer moist, rich soils with slight acidity. Their companion plants include some of ours: maple, hemlock, mayapples, and trillium. Mine have thrived in a low, wet, flat spot with partial clay.

Their preference for shade makes them delightful understory plants in our forests. One study showed that seedlings emerged best in 30% shade, and leaf surface area is likely to increase with shade.

Now is the time to plant bulbs at 6 to 8 inches apart, top-dressed with compost. A mulch of leaves, especially maple, will help them retain moisture into our dry summer.

With patience, we can all hit the on-ramp for perennial yields of this cherished woodland plant that combines the best features of garlic, onions and leeks!

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*