



Conservation Conversation

This year the Van Buren Conservation District and dedicated board and staff were in the spotlight many times for nominations, recognition and awards for hard work and success with new and ongoing programs here in Van Buren County.

Two members of our team were nominated for state awards from the Michigan Association of Conservation Districts. Erin Fuller, Watershed Coordinator, was nominated for Technician of the year. With years of experience and knowledge, Erin is dedicated to improving water quality and focusing on high standards in Van Buren County. The nomination of Board of Director of the Year went to Carl Druskovich for continued support for the VBCD, involvement in programs and for striving to not only talk the talk about conservation, but walk the walk on his own farm in Hamilton Township.

Van Buren County Farm Bureau and Michigan Farm Bureau presented the State Ecology Champion of the Year Award to Kyle Mead, MAEAP Technician, for his continued efforts working with local agriculture producers, reducing environmental risks, encouraging land stewardship and striving to a top five ranking for verifications in the State with the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program.

The Van Buren Conservation District was awarded the State's Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program Grant Host of the Year for the continued effort, team leadership, program success and involvement in encouraging conservation in Van Buren County. The District was also recognized for the partnership and involvement of the Volunteer Stream Monitoring Program development and success. Great things happen when a group of people have knowledge, passion and work hard as a team, keeping the momentum of success going year after year. Our calendars are full and we look forward to another successful year as there are good things to come in 2016!

Thank you to our board, staff, volunteers and residents for continued support and your care for natural resources in Van Buren County.

AJ Brucks,
Executive
Director



VBCD Financials for 2015

Kim Sinclair, Administrator

REVENUES	
Federal Grants	\$ 30,984
State Grants	\$ 71,715
Local Contributions & Grants	\$ 166,481
Charges for Services	\$ 25,050
Interest & Rentals	\$ 14,845
Other Revenues	\$ 69,486
Tree Sales	\$ 20,313
Total Revenue & Other Sources	\$ 398,874
EXPENDITURES	
281 Operations	\$ 109,188
280 Resource Recovery	\$ 14,520
282 MAEAP	\$ 67,750
289 HAP	\$ 317
279 Nature Conservancy Coke-Cola	\$ 25,166
276 Southwest MI Planning - GLC	\$ 7,500
287 Drain Commission	\$ 41,586
288 Paw Paw Village	\$ 76,348
291 MI Natural Shoreline	\$ 11
291.1 Model Lake Ordinance	\$ 33,115
294 Reforestation	\$ 12,906
297 MiCorp Stream Monitoring	\$ 2,788
Total Expenditures & Other Uses	\$ 391,195
Net Revenues (Expenditures)	\$ 7,679
Beginning Fund Balance	\$ 560,634
Ending Fund Balance	\$ 568,313



Board Of Directors:
 Bryan Cronenwett, Chair; Mike Rainey, Vice Chair;
 Jan Petersen, Secretary; Carl Druskovich, Treasurer;
 Paulette Rybarski, Member



Staff
 AJ Brucks, Executive Director; Kim Sinclair, Administrator
 Erin Fuller and Matt Meersman, Watershed Coordinators;
 Kyle Mead MAEAP Technician and
 Colleen Forestieri, Conservation Technician

Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program

Kyle Mead, MAEAP Technician

Van Buren County



Kyle has been working for the VBCD since October of 2004, serving as a technician for the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP), a grant through the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD). He is a specialist in MAEAP Verifications, irrigation, and small fruit, and is also a member of the Local Emergency Planning Committee for Van Buren County. He sits on the Farmstead and Cropping System Committees for MAEAP, which helps to update MAEAP policy and standards for the entire state. In 2015, Kyle was named Michigan Farm Bureau's State Ecology Champion for his continued work within MAEAP and his activities with the Conservation District and in his community.

The goal of the MAEAP Program is to offer free, confidential, and non-regulatory farm assessments that assist farmers in complying with state and federal laws and Michigan Right to Farm Guidelines. Farm*A*Systs are assessments that evaluate practices done at the Farm/Homestead such as Fertilizer Storage, Fuel Storage, Pesticide Storage and Well Isolation. A Crop*A*Syst works the same as a Farm*A*Syst, in that there are Assessment Questions pertaining to specific practices, but the Crop*A*Syst covers practices in the field such as Pesticide, Fertilizer, and Irrigation utilization and recordkeeping.

*FY 2015 year end percentage:
 130% of required assessments
 147.9% of Verifications/Risk Reductions*

- Farm*A*Systs completed in FY 2014 – 18
- Crop*A*Systs completed in FY 2014 – 12
- Orchard*A*Systs completed in FY 2014 – 19
- Livestock*A*Systs completed in FY 2014 – 2
- MAEAP Verifications in FY 2014 - 28

Practices found with the potential to cause adverse environmental impacts are logged in the Farm*A*Syst or Crop*A*Syst as a 'to-do list' for the producer and MAEAP Technicians to complete. When a potential impact is reduced it is known as a Risk Reduction. Risk Reductions can be the closing of an unused well, pouring a concrete pad for the transfer of fuels, or erecting a building designed specifically for fertilizer and pesticide storage.

- Risk Reductions completed in FY 2014 – 136

Once a farm has completed a Farm*A*Syst or a Crop*A*Syst, evaluated and reduced all risks on their farm, they can then become MAEAP Verified by MDARD. A MAEAP Verification is recognition from the State that all practices, procedures and operations done on the farm are environmentally sound according to Michigan's Generally Accepted Agricultural Practices (GAAMPS). Producers obtaining this Verification may choose to post a sign at their farm site to let friends, neighbors, and customers know that environmental stewardship is important to the farm owners and operators. A MAEAP Verification also comes with marketing opportunities as well as legal protections for MAEAP Farmers that maintain MAEAP Standards.

- MAEAP Verifications completed in FY 2015
 - Farmstead System Verifications – 11
 - Cropping System Verifications – 16
 - Livestock System Verifications - 2



Congratulations to farms that were MAEAP verified in 2015!

Supporting Agencies and Organizations:

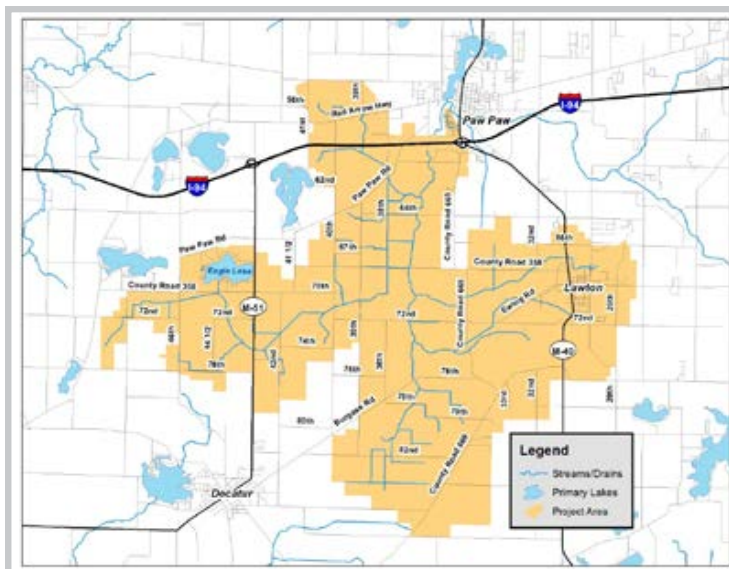




Drain Fee Reduction Project
 Staff: Colleen Forestieri, Erin Fuller and Matt Meersman

In 2013 the Van Buren Conservation District began work on a two year pilot project supported by The Nature Conservancy to incentivize the use of conservation practices on farm ground through the reduction of drain assessments. As part of this project we developed an innovative new drain assessment method and administered a conservation practice certification program. The project has received accolades around the state, and was recently featured in an article in *Pipeline*, the magazine of the MI Association of County Drain Commissioners.

Project Area—Gates and Eagle Lake Drainage Districts



Matt Meersman and Joe Parman discuss drain assessments with a landowner who certified his conservation practices

Program Highlights

Gates Drain District Sediment Reduction	192.4 tons/yr.
Eagle Drain District Sediment Reduction	94.6 tons/yr.
Increase in Groundwater Recharge	70.46 inches/yr.
Groundwater Recharge, Total Gallons	37,027,006 gal.
Total acres - cover crops	494.6 acres
Total acres - filter strips	12.7 acres
Total acres - no till	599.9 acres

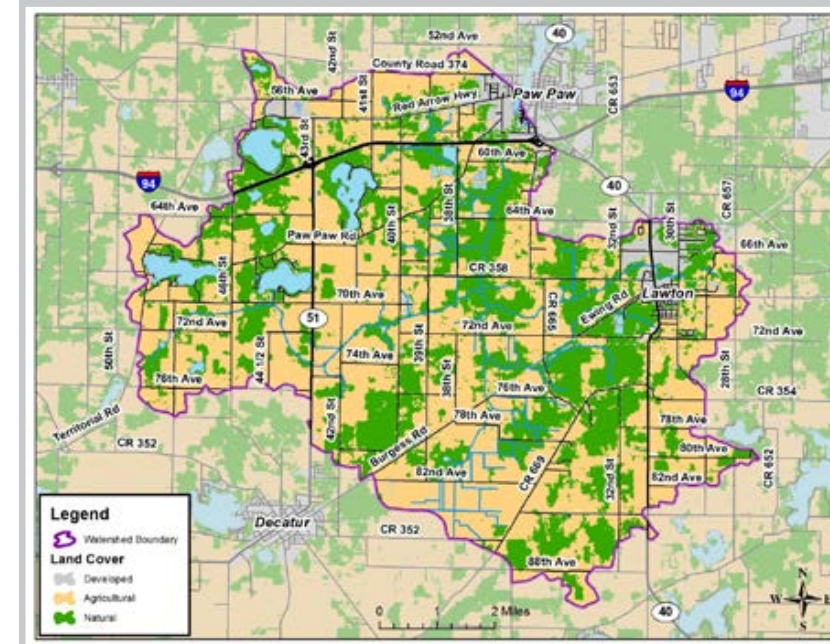
Partners involved

- The Nature Conservancy
- Van Buren County Drain Commissioner
- Michigan State University Institute of Water Research
- Landowners

South Branch Runoff Reduction Program
 Staff: Colleen Forestieri, Erin Fuller and Matt Meersman



Project Area—South Branch of the Paw Paw River Watershed



In 2013 the Van Buren Conservation District began work as a subcontractor on a 3-year grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality through the U.S. EPA Federal Clean Water Act. The grant supports activities to improve water quality in the South Branch of the Paw Paw River and builds off the Paw Paw River Watershed Management plan. Since the project began, highlights include:

- Hosting six outreach events (conferences, workshops & field days)
- Distributing cost-share payments to thirteen farmers who installed new best management practices

2015 Totals

Sediment Reduction	226 tons/yr.
Phosphorus Reduction	203 lbs./yr.
Nitrogen Reduction	407 lbs./yr.
Total acres - cover crops	841 acres
Total acres - mulch till	30 acres
Total acres - no-till	316 acres

Partners involved

- Village of Paw Paw
- Southwest Michigan Planning Commission
- Van Buren County Drain Commissioner
- Two Rivers Coalition
- Michigan Dept. of Environmental Quality
- Landowners



Attendees of the 2015 Fall Farm Field day learn about the benefits of soil health with a rainfall simulator demonstration

*Agricultural Best Management Practice Programs
Paw Paw River Watershed
Colleen Forestieri, Conservation Technician*



Colleen Forestieri is in her fourth year with the District working to improve ground and surface water quality through the promotion of Best Management Practices (BMPs) on farm land. She outreaches to farmers on incorporating no-till, cover crops, filter strips & wetland restoration on their property. She also recruits speakers and other farmers to speak at their conferences and field days. In addition to her original outreach efforts and goals, she has organized a aerial cover crop program, where cover crop is flown into standing corn and beans. This year over 3,500 acres of annual ryegrass was flown on. The co-op has been offered for the last three seasons. Over 10,000 acres have been aerial cover cropped over the last 3 years. Colleen has also been working to promote the District's newest piece of rental equipment, a 2015 John Deere 1590 No-till Drill, to further promote the use of cover crops. Lastly, Colleen has helped other Conservation Districts and organizations

BMPs Acreage as a result of all BMP Incentive Outreach

Activities:

- Conservation Cover & Cover Crops — 3,168 acres
- Reduced Tillage — 320.5 acres
- No-Till — 2235.5 acres
- Filter Strips/Grass Waterway— 23/5.5 acres

Estimated Groundwater Recharge:

156,820,381 total gallons

Estimated Sediment Reduction:

1,675.2 total tons of erosion

Recent Information & Education Activities:

- Spring and Fall Field Day for Growers
- Managed No-Till Rental Equipment schedule
- Recruiting for South Branch Project
- Managing contracts and verifying practices
- Working with Drain Commissioner on Programs
- Recruited speakers for Farming for the Future and Winter Conference
- Volunteered a Cover Crop Demo Plot at Breakfast on the Farm at Hood's Dairy



Left: No-till corn residue with cover crop that was flown on. Residue on the surface helps to reduce erosion, hold moisture and build soil. Cover crops scavenge nutrients, hold soil and feed microbial life.



Right: Pilot seeding annual ryegrass cover crop into standing corn crop on August 27, 2014.

Partners:

- *The Nature Conservancy
- *The Coca-Cola Company
- *VB County Drain Commission
- *Farm Bureau
- *SW MI Planning Commission
- *MDEQ
- *Village of Paw Paw
- *NRCS



*Conservation Partnership
Federal Farm Bill Program Information*

Each year, the Conservation District works directly with the USDA - Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to administer Federal Farm Bill programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) and the new Agriculture Water Enhancement Program (AWEP) that funds projects specifically in our small region. These programs not only offer valuable technical assistance to Van Buren County farmers and landowners, helping them become better stewards of the land, but also contribute to the local economy by bringing in federal dollars to fund conservation practices. This money has a direct impact on the success of local farms, businesses and contractors. The figures below represent the federal cost share dollars brought into Van Buren County as a result of this partnership and the farm bill programs.

In FY2015, the program delivered approximately \$12 million in program benefit practices in Michigan through the Farm Bill. The VBCD and Paw Paw Service Center NRCS had over 80 contracts on over 7,000 acres with a total cost share payout of around \$546,810.94.

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is by far the most popular farm bill program in Van Buren County. Over the past ten years almost 10 million dollars of federal funding has been allocated to Van Buren County landowners through the EQIP program alone. Additionally future 2015 funding obligated to VBC landowners is approximately \$134,956.00.

Some of the more common practices funded through the EQIP program include (but not limited to):

- Irrigation Water Management
- Pest and Nutrient Management
- Agrichemical Containment Facility
- Cover Crops
- Heavy Use Area Protection
- Prescribed Grazing
- Grade Stabilization Structure
- Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment
- Invasive Species control/removal
- Stream Crossings



EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS AND FIELD DAYS

FARM EQUIPMENT RENTALS

NATURAL SHORELINE PROJECTS

LOCAL FOOD GUIDE

FREE 2015 LOCAL FOOD & FARM GUIDE

HOUSEHOLD HAZARDOUS WASTE RECYCLING

TREE SEEDLING SALE IN APRIL

NATIVE PLANT SALE IN MAY

CONSERVATION PRACTICE CONSULTING FOR FARMERS AND LAND OWNERS

MACROINVERTEBRATE COLLECTION/STREAM MONITORING

SCHOOL RECYCLING EDUCATION

RIVER RESCUE CLEANUP

TIRE RECYCLING

MICHIGAN AGRICULTURE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSURANCE PROGRAM (MAEAP)

LOCAL FOOD GUIDE

HOUSEHOLD HAZARDOUS WASTE RECYCLING

FREE 2015 LOCAL FOOD & FARM GUIDE

NATIVE PLANT SALE IN MAY

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TIRE RECYCLING

Michigan Conservation District

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FACEBOOK.COM/VANBURENCD

We do all of this —and more!

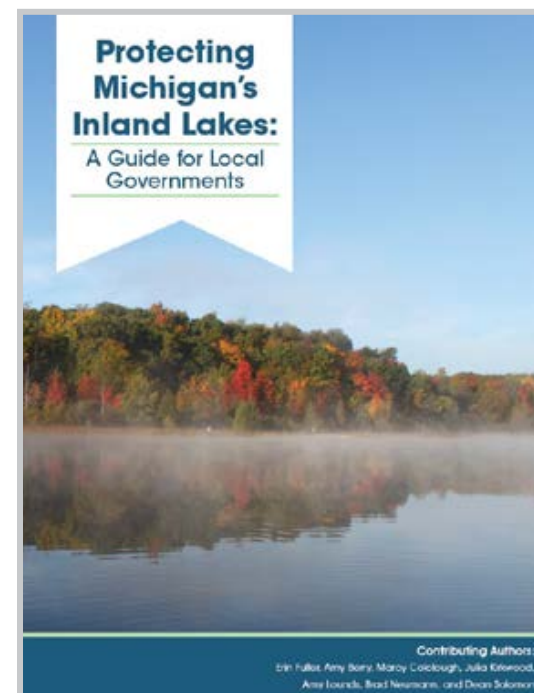


*Michigan Inland Lake Project
Erin Fuller, Watershed Coordinator*

We continue to work on a 3-year, \$60,000 grant from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality to develop model ordinances for inland lake protection statewide.

Activities include:

- Developing model ordinances that are protective of inland lakes at the local government level
- Developing a guidebook entitled "Protecting Michigan's Inland Lakes: a Guide for Local Governments"
- Creating a "toolkit" for communities to support ordinances (educational materials, tips for enforcement, etc.)
- Developing an online training for local government officials
- Holding 4 workshops around the state on local inland lake protection options for local government officials



We also support the activities of the Michigan Natural Shoreline Partnership, hosting field days and workshops to train contractors, landowners and other natural resource professionals.



Participants in a Certified Natural Shoreline Professionals training class repair an eroding bank on Maple Lake in Paw Paw, July 2015.



Promoting and Protecting Our Natural Resources Agricultural Conservation Education

15" No Till Drill



A 15" no-till drill replaced our no-till planter this year (planter was used for 4 seasons with almost 4K acres planted in total). We will be promoting the use of cover crops with this drill.

Brillion Seeder



19 farmers and 302 acres later the Brillion Seeder has traveled all over our county.

No Till Drill



The 4" Truax No-Till drill planted over 150 acres of land in Van Buren County.

Cover Crop Co-Op

Over 3500 acres of cover crops were flown on this year by Nick's Flying Service out of Indiana. Seed was dispersed before the crop was harvested which will allow a cover of annual rye grass into the spring. This was a third year Co-Op that will be available again next year.



Annual Meeting-Summer Farm Day and Picnic

On a beautiful summer day in July the District hosted their Annual Summer Meeting and Farm Day at the 2 Paws Hops Farm (Steve Holden) of Paw Paw. It was our first year holding our meeting at a hop farm with a hop processing facility.

Two awards were given out this year; the "Farmer of the Year" was awarded to the late Bill Mihelich for his years of conservation farming in Paw Paw. Bill passed away in 2014 but was recognized for his leadership in No-till farming. Bill was active with the conservation district and hosted multiple field days and served on the board for several terms. Before passing away, Bill was informed that some of his fields were eligible for the "Drain Fee Reduction Program."

Kenneth Nesbitt was awarded the "Conservationist of the Year". Kenneth works closely with the VBCD on several projects, including the River Rescue where he helps identify locations that need attention for trash clean up. Kenneth takes pride in being a team leader for this event by taking individuals out on the River, giving them the opportunity to experience a natural resource that he loves and giving a helping hand by cleaning up trash along the way.

Spring and Fall Farm Field Day

Local farmers gather at Jeff Stuck's Farm outside of Marcellus and Ryan Meachum's Farm outside of Lawrence for a spring and fall farm field day to learn about cover crop benefits and management. Cover crops not only cover the soil and keep the sediment from eroding off the land into nearby waterbodies but create a healthier soil by building organic matter, nutrients and habitat for beneficial microbes. A soil pit was dug to examine just how deep the roots (over 4 ft. deep!) of a cover crop can grow and expand and farmers were able to see firsthand exactly what and why cover crops are great for the soil and health of their crop.



Annual Meeting—Summer Farm Day & Picnic

2 Paws Hops Farm

July 22, 2015

Paw Paw, MI



This fun event, held in the beautiful setting of the recently-created 2 Paws Hop Farm, included director elections, presentations, Farmer of the Year Award, Conservationist of the Year Award, a pig roast, drinks, farm tour, music and great company!

Volunteer Stream Monitoring in the Paw Paw Watershed And Annual River Rescue

Volunteer Stream Monitoring Program in the Paw Paw River Watershed

The VBCD and Two Rivers Coalition were awarded a grant from the MDEQ, Great Lakes Commission and MiCorps to further develop the Volunteer Stream Monitoring Program started last year. Macroinvertebrates (insects we can see) are found in and along side waterbodies and are indicators of water quality. The more variety and quantity of insects you find the better in most cases. Some species are very sensitive to pollution and will not be found in degraded water whereas other species can be found just about anywhere.

- Two Events (May and October)
- Around 26 volunteer at each event
- Twelve different sites were designated for collections
- Numerous insects were collected, identified and reported to the State's database

This great educational program gets volunteers out to help do scientific research that will better water quality and the environment in Van Buren County well into the future.



River Rescue

The overall goal was to improve the water quality and vitality of local creeks, stream banks and the health and biodiversity of critical wildlife populations and habitats by removing trash and debris from the water and along the banks at or below the water's edge on creeks and rivers in the Paw Paw River and Black River Watersheds. River Rescue continues efforts from the past five years in both the Paw Paw and Black River Watersheds.

This one day event, held the first Saturday in August, makes a difference and creates awareness of the importance to properly recycle and dispose of trash.

	2015 Event	Since 2010
Volunteers:	16	274
Miles of Water Cleaned Up:	10 miles	108 miles
Amount of Trash:	300 lbs.	75,760 lbs.
Tires Collected:	12 tires	4788 tires



These event would not happen without dedicated partners, volunteers and townships/villages/cities who see this as a benefit for our community and our natural resources.



Van Buren County Resource Recovery Program

Household Hazardous Waste Collection

The Resource Recovery Program is growing in Van Buren County. Two Household Hazardous Waste Collections were held in 2015; one in Paw Paw and the other in South Haven. Many townships, villages and cities supported their residents by pledging monies to help recycle collected materials. Residents from almost all municipalities participated by bringing household hazards to the collection. Almost 9,000 pounds of hazardous waste was collected and properly recycled. This year the latex paint collection was booming and we expect this collection to continue to grow. E-paint recyclers joined us from Battle Creek and collected any color and any size of latex paint for a \$1 per can.



Electronic Recycling

The E-Waste collecting is still booming! The partnership with The Community Thrift Shop in Paw Paw and Green Earth Recycling to offer year round E-waste recycling is becoming a great success for Van Buren County. This collection site offers residents a convenient way to recycle unwanted electronics and appliances (anything with a cord). All items collected are recycled properly and the waste is diverted from the landfills. This year residents have dropped off and properly recycled over 60,000 lbs. of electronic items found in their homes.



Scrap Tire Recycling

Van Buren County and Van Buren Conservation District are partners of the Southwest Michigan Solid Waste Consortium. For the past four years the Consortium has been awarded a Scrap Tire Recycling Grant from the State of Michigan. Last year, fifteen semi loads of passenger tires were recycled in our region providing another successful year.



Many efforts were also made along the roads in Van Buren County. Numerous tires were reported dumped along beautiful back roads. The District rounded up volunteers and were able to pick them up and get them recycled properly.

Clean Sweep Recycling

Attention Farmers, gardeners, and residents! The Clean Sweep Program allows farmers, gardeners and residents that have unused and outdated pesticides or mercury to properly drop off these items free of charge!! Local residents can drop off at our HHW collections or specific events for Clean Sweep in Berrien County throughout the year.





Tree Seedling Sale and Native Plant Palooza

Tree Seedling Sale in April
Over 25,000 trees and shrubs were sold to be used in projects such as: windbreaks, wildlife plantings, reforestation, stream stabilizations, landscaping and beautification. Trees benefit all of us from the air we breathe to the shade we sit in! The Tree Seedling Sale is the VBCD's biggest fundraiser and helps fund programming and education throughout Van Buren County.

THANK YOU to staff and volunteers that helped prepare thousands of trees for our annual seedling sale.

White Pine Give-A-Way

The VBCD partnered with Michigan Association of Conservation Districts, Consumers Energy and Michigan Speedway to give-a-way White Pines, the state tree, to be planted in public areas to gain wildlife habitat, beautification. Hundreds of White Pines were given to parks and schools across Michigan and planted for everyone to enjoy.



Native Plant Sale in May

The Native Plant Palooza was a terrific day with tons of fun. Beautiful native plants were available from Hidden Savanna Nursery, as well as a great rain barrel building workshop. The Fresh Food Fairy used her bike powered blender to whip up some tasty treats, and many vendors set up to show their products and encourage gardening and native plants. Almost 1000 native plants found their way home to Van Buren County yards.



Why we encourage natives: native plants are adapted to Michigan's unique soils and climate, they often require less water and fertilization, and are generally lower maintenance once established. Natives can be used in any landscaping situation, from your yard to your back forty, shoreline stabilization to rain gardens. Proceeds from the Native Plant Sale directly support the educational programs and projects hosted by the Conservation District.

Tree Seedling Sale & Native Plant Palooza

Every Spring

Paw Paw, MI



Lanceleaf
Coreopsis



Wild Purple
Indigo



Trillium



Rain Barrel
Demonstration



Flowers of
Ninebark



Lilac



Butterfly Milkweed



Fruit of
Nanking Cherry




Established Butterfly garden
from Plant Sale (in June)



The mission of the Van Buren Conservation District is to promote the conservation of natural resources through partnerships by providing public education, demonstrations and technical assistance while working together for future generations.



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VAN BUREN

CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Services and Programs

- Tree seedling sales
- Native plant sales
- Watershed protection projects
- Groundwater stewardship
- Critical dunes permitting
- Irrigation uniformity
- Irrigation scheduling
- Conservation practice consulting
- Farm equipment rentals
- Local food & farm guide
- Educational workshops and field days
- Farm bill program assistance
- Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program (MAEAP)