

# Auspicious Beginnings

*by Rebecca Durham*

*from Kelseya, Spring 2006*

Having a native plant garden is easy and may have the most auspicious of beginnings. My first experience with native plant gardening was in Oregon while doing fungi surveys in national forests. The fieldwork was remote and in some of the most challenging terrain I had ever worked. I was living out of my car, fulfilling my Kerouac longings. One day, deep in the Coast Range, I came upon a ridge where there was some abandoned logging trash. Among it was a little sterno can that had filled with soil. Growing in the can was the most wonderful fern I had ever seen, delicately perfect. How exquisite, life sprouting in the most unassuming places! I hiked back to my car with it and placed it in the cup holder where it lived with me for two months.

Years later when my partner and I bought our house here in the Flathead Valley, neither of us were thrilled with the huge amount of lawn. The next-door neighbor asked us with a wry smile if we, too, were going to try to grow a plush green lawn on the patchy dandelion area that separated our land. We told him no; we were going to bring back the forest.

It started slowly, with a few transplanted aspen trees making a little island. The lawn grew up around it, and one day it was time for all the turf to go and the native plant area was marked with a rock boundary. The plants that had been persisting all these years under the mower blades suddenly had a place to thrive. *Antennaria* sp., *Mahonia repens*, *Rosa* sp., and *Carex* sp. had all been waiting, stubbornly refusing to succumb to the grassy monoculture prized by so many. Little plants out of the safety zone were transplanted into the garden. *Aster conspicuus* and *Anaphalis margaritacea* seeded themselves into the garden and thrived, and *Gaillardia aristata* proved the most vivid and persistent flowerer. We

laid down some newspaper and mulch to help combat the weeds, and did our best to weed diligently. We put in some charismatic stones and wood, and marveled at its beauty. It has taken a lot of work, and there is always more grass or *Linaria vulgaris* to contend with. Overall, it has been one of the most rewarding experiences in our new home.

This winter, during the arctic blast that plummeted the temperature, I stepped outside for some fresh air and a jaunt about the yard. The native plant garden was a place of wonder, even in the bitter cold days of February. Larch needles, now faded from golden to burnt sienna, were strewn atop the mulch. The dried stalks of blanket flower and showy aster rose stiffly from the frozen earth, a silent reminder of the splendor of past blooms and hope of blooms to come. Conspicuous within the rock boundaries were many lichen thalli, including fluorescent *Letharia vulpina* and *Hypogymnia* sp. with its green-gray hollow lobes.

In just a few months spring will grace us with the vibrant return of all things green and good. New native plant seedlings and the return of the established perennials in our garden will be as exciting as the return of thrushes and the blooming of glacier lilies. Maybe you are also greatly anticipating the stirrings in your native plant garden. If you haven't yet taken the first step in creating your own, perhaps this is the summer to start. After all, maybe all you need is a sterno can, and the persistence of life will do the rest.