What’s Inside the Fence
Legacy Volunteer Jim Coleman
By Donna Ahrens

When asked when he first visited Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, Jim Coleman smiles. Sitting at a south Minneapolis coffee shop on a rainy September morning, he recalls going to the Garden with his parents about six decades ago. “It was fall, probably October, and when we got to the Garden, the gate was locked. So we hiked around the fenced perimeter, in Wirth Park. But I was intrigued about what was inside that fence.”

Over the years, Jim made it his business to find out, as his interest in nature led him to pay periodic visits to the Garden. Though he hadn’t grown up surrounded by wildflowers—“our yard was grass, no flowers,” he says wryly—he was always interested in the natural world. At his parents’ cabin in northern Minnesota, he says, “I was fascinated to notice how the trees and flowers changed over time. As the days and weeks passed, I would watch and think, “Aha, so that’s what happens to this plant!”

Jim has explored many of the nature preserves and parks in the Twin Cities, and his interests eventually coalesced in the Master Naturalist Program offered by University of Minnesota Extension. Through classroom learning, books and hands-on field trips, the program trains nature lovers of all ages for the work of volunteering in the outdoors.

In 2009, while enrolled in the program, Jim heard there was an opening for a Legacy Program volunteer at Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden. He jumped at the opportunity. “I had volunteered with the Friends’ invasive plants group earlier that year, pulling buckthorn,” he says, “and having a plot of my own seemed like a good next step.”

It was indeed. Since becoming a Legacy Program volunteer, Jim has tended to several plots in the Garden. Each Legacy volunteer is responsible for a small, designated section of the Wildflower Garden and commits to removing all of the invasive species in that section for the season. Garden Curator Susan Wilkins trains the volunteers and oversees the project.

“I like the idea of having a particular area where I can see the changes throughout the year,” Jim says. I especially like the early spring, with the light filtering through the trees, and it’s easy to spot the birds. This year, a pileated woodpecker and a great horned owl like to hang out nearby. And they seem pretty comfortable, even with me there—probably because I’m not bothering them, but just digging and working in my plots.

“It’s very rewarding work. I’ve reduced a lot of garlic mustard over the years, and it gets easier and easier to do. But the buckthorn always comes back,” he adds with a laugh.

Jim is a proponent of any and all kinds of volunteer work involving nature. Now that he’s retired, he also cares for a plot of land at Lone Lake Park in Minnetonka and does some periodic volunteer work at the Minnesota Valley National Refuge. In addition, he and his wife Jan, an artist, are currently co-chairs of the tours committee of the Twin Cities chapter of Wild Ones, a nonprofit educational organization of native plant enthusiasts.

Reflecting on his long-time fascination with the natural world, Jim remarks, “It seems that we’re losing so much of the natural environment and wildlife is being squeezed out. At the Wildflower Garden, there are so many different programs and ways to be involved in nature, from birding and enjoying wildflowers to taking classes and nature walks, to caring for the land.”

The Friends and Garden staff are thankful that Jim took the initiative to solve the mystery of “what was inside that fence” so many years ago.

— Donna Ahrens is copyeditor of the Fringed Gentian