

Lakeshore lawns: In Detroit Lakes, native plant restorations catch on



Watersports and a variety of entertainment options drew Justin Scallon of Fargo back to Detroit Lakes, where his family had vacationed. Through a Becker Soil & Water Conservation District program, Scallon pursued a shoreline restoration that incorporated native plants.

Justin Scallon's 125-foot stretch of lakefront interrupts a band of rock riprap that cinches most of Detroit Lake's shore.

Its bright-green oats cover crop, tall spikes of sedges and flowering black-eyed Susans stand out from neighbors' beige-and-gray rock landscaping.

Like the riprap, Scallon's shoreline restoration will stabilize the bank. But his restoration also will cut the amount of phosphorus that enters Detroit Lake, reduce runoff, and provide fish and wildlife habitat. When the native wildflower seeding reaches maturity in about three

years, it will bloom purple, yellow and white.

"When the (SWCD) had this program come out and they showed me the graphics and the layouts for what they could do, I just fell in love with it immediately," Scallon said. "With rocks, you don't get colors. You get colors with all the plants that'll start blooming."

Scallon's restoration is part of a Becker Soil & Water Conservation District initiative that gives lakeshore property owners a chance to help rescue recreational waters from the brink of impairment. A \$254,900 Clean Water Fund grant

covers 75 percent of landowners' costs. Projects might include native plant restorations, rain gardens or gutters – all designed to clean up the lake.

The initiative targets 12 phosphorus-sensitive lakes where water quality is in peril or high quality and in need of protection.

"Some of (the lakes) were outstanding resources that were well-worth any protective effort. Anything you're going to do to keep water quality from taking a shift is good – from a standpoint of surface water quality, fisheries quality, recreational opportunities,

groundwater recharge,” said Peter Mead, Becker SWCD administrator.

Detroit Lake – the centerpiece of Detroit Lakes’ tourism in a county with 500 lakes and 300,000 annual visitors – is at risk because of elevated phosphorus levels. It connects to Curfman Pond, Lake Sallie and Lake Melissa.

“If Detroit Lake ever flipped it would be disastrous all the way downstream because everybody’s kind of at their tipping point already, and Detroit Lake’s the biggest contributor (of) upstream water,” Mead said.

On Detroit Lake, 710 parcels of land touch the water. Year-round and vacation homes range from 1950s cabins to 7,500-square-foot new construction. Restaurants, a marina, beach and paved walking trail ring the lake.

“It’s sort of a playground more than anything,” Mead said.

“They (lakeshore property owners) like that green right down to the edge. They like to have a big sand beach. And it’s not necessarily what’s supposed to be here. A few fairly significant projects around the lake helped to change attitudes pretty quickly. As with everything we do, yes, we’re here to treat resource concerns. But really what we do is we change human behavior,” Mead said.

One landowner can’t single-handedly reverse decades of lawn-fertilizer applications and paved-surface runoff. But one landowner can spread the word about the Becker SWCD initiative.



Many lakeshore property owners prefer lawns that reach the water’s edge. A Becker SWCD initiative aims to cut the amount of phosphorus entering at-risk or high-quality lakes.

A Fargo-based homebuilder, Scallon, 36, was drawn to the town where he had vacationed as a child. Now he visits with his wife and three children, ages 2, 5 and 7.

“There are so many things to do out on this lake that you can’t do in other areas,” Scallon said, listing restaurants, watersports, city-sponsored events and a public beach. “I’m getting to show them what I enjoyed when I was 2, 5 and 7, and they’re hopefully going to do that with their kids someday.”

Scallon bought the vacation property with 50 feet of shoreline on Detroit Lake in 2012, and then purchased the adjoining property as a rental unit in May 2017. Both lawns extended downhill to a wave-carved drop-off.

Once he saw the first restoration taking shape, Scallon signed on for the second. One of Scallon’s neighbors saw his shoreline and decided to pursue a restoration.

If pre-settlement were the gauge, restoring Detroit Lake’s shoreline would mean restoring the forest – a rich riparian zone supporting fish and wildlife, and filtering pollutants. Native forbs, sedges

and grasses are a compromise.

“We’re realists. If these were shoreline restorations, we’d have trees everywhere,” Mead said. “It’s kind of about striking a balance. You reduce that disturbance right by the shore. It’s better for everything that lives in the water and its better for us because we rely on the water.”

Shoreline restoration can be a tough sell unless property owners have witnessed water clarity diminish or blue-green algae appear.

“A lot of people will be shy of doing native buffers because they’re worried about what their neighbors will think of it,” said Gabe Dretsch, Becker SWCD shoreland technician.

Landowners who sign on to the SWCD program have a say in the plant mix, and get a pretty good idea how a mature planting will look. Armed with mapping tools and a database of options and related costs, SWCD staff provide quick assessments and customized plans. Scallon estimated his cost-share would total \$4,800.

Scallon’s view of Detroit Lake will remain unobscured; the tallest plants grow at the bottom of the bank. He’ll still be able to access his boats.

“We try to keep it so they have an area for recreation. That’s important to them and us that they have that, because that’s what they come to the lake for. We try to work with them as much as we can,” Mead said.