



The Conservancy's nearly 200-year-old oaks were key to restoring the oak savanna. Their spreading branches allow enough sunlight for native prairie and savanna plants to grow in the understory. This photo shows the restored oak savanna in 2017. Photo by Michael P. Anderson.

The Paddock Oak Savanna

Back in the 1830s, southern Wisconsin featured open oak savannas flourishing amid widespread prairies. When the burr oaks at the Pope Farm Conservancy were young, farming began to take over more land. As our trees grew to maturity in the early 1900s, oak savanna plant communities became fragmented due to agriculture and competition from tree species no longer suppressed by landscape fires. By the late 20th century, burr oaks had fewer and fewer acres on which to grow. Today, oak savannas make up less than 1% of their original 5.5 million acres, and are one of the most threatened plant communities in the Midwest. That is why our oak trees, which are approximately 185 years old, are very special. They have held their ground to now grace about four acres in the heart of the conservancy.

In 2013, the Friends began creating an understory in this oak savanna filled with native prairie and savanna plants. Our ancient oaks are “open-grown,” allowing sunlight to

reach the ground. Some sun-loving prairie plants, such as spiderwort, pale purple coneflower and rough blazing star, can be found. Shade-tolerant plants, for example, poke milkweed, purple milkweed and yellow pimpernel, can grow under tree branches. Savannas also provide unique habitat for some animals, including nesting sites for birds and acorns as wildlife food. Birders should look for bluebirds, eastern wood-pewee, wild turkey, and great crested flycatchers.

Friends volunteers and student interns have contributed hundreds of hours to restoring this rare historic landscape. Countless invasive plants have been removed and the Friends have sown seeds and planted seedlings. In the future, burning will occasionally be conducted. Savannas are dependent on fires to maintain the oak openings and suppress competing trees. Savanna species now have improved conditions to become established.



Art Pope stands by the sheep paddock under one of the ancient burr oaks in this photo from 1992. The area was planted with fescue grasses and served as a sheep pasture and enclosure from 1962–2008. Courtesy of Jeff Martin, JMAR Foto-Werks.

How the Paddock Oak Savanna got its name

The area that is currently home to the Paddock Oak Savanna was never tilled for agriculture and served different functions over the years. The land was used as pasture for beef cattle and sheep starting in the early 1960s, and later planted to no-mow fescue grass. From 2000 – 2008, the savanna was the site of an enclosed holding area, or paddock, for sheep. The photo shows Art Pope standing by what was then the sheep paddock in 1992. The paddock fence was removed in 2009, and in 2013 the Friends began their restoration work.



The Paddock Oak Savanna today provides habitat for wildlife and pollinators, preserves native vegetation, and offers the chance to experience a rare part of Wisconsin's natural history. More than 120 native plants now flourish here. Photo by Janie M. Starzewski.



Stiff gentian, a true savanna species, is a unique biennial plant currently growing in the savanna. Photo by Stacey J. Meanwell.

Courtesy of the Town of Middleton and the Friends of Pope Farm Conservancy