

News Release

No. 0560008 (Fort Meade Grows Wild with BayScapes)

By Susan Phelps

On May 20, 1998, the mid-day sun shined brightly on Fort Meade as more than 130 volunteers dug into the parched, stubborn earth with trowels and shovels to plant the Maryland installation's first BayScapes garden. Fort Meade invited area schoolchildren, local gardening clubs, area residents, and federal, state, and local officials to participate in the event and create a garden that will not only beautify the landscape but help save the Chesapeake Bay.

BayScapes is a program sponsored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&WS) and the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay that promotes the use of native, low maintenance vegetation for landscaping practices. The result is a garden that provides multiple benefits to both the gardener and the environment.

To begin with, BayScapes uses plants that are native to the area. As a result, these plants require less maintenance. They are often more resistant to diseases and pests and so require less pesticides. They thrive on the natural soil and climate and, therefore, use less water and fertilizers. This low maintenance regime means less work for the gardener, less water use during the summer season when rivers run driest, and decreased amounts of nutrients and toxins polluting local waterways and ultimately the Chesapeake Bay.

BayScapes also provides food and habitat for wildlife. As a result, butterflies and birds can often be seen among the flowers.

"We're planting this garden here today as a part of Fort Meade's continuing and growing commitment to restore and protect the environment, particularly the Chesapeake Bay that we are all a part of," said Garrison Commander Col. John D. Frketic during the opening ceremonies of the planting event.

Bruce de Grazia, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary of Defense (Environmental Quality) emphasized how important the Bay has been to the military throughout history as a source of food, shelter, and training grounds and how these resources are still important to the military today. "The Chesapeake Bay serves as a vital component of the military's training and readiness mission," he said.

With more than 50 installations in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the Department of Defense is a one of the largest landholders in the region and has been actively involved in the Bay's cleanup since 1965. With clean water a top priority of the Clinton Administration, Mr. De Grazia said that the Defense Department is placing greater emphasis on the relationship between water quality and land use. Programs, such as BayScapes, are important to this effort because they are a land use that helps improve water quality.

According to Mr. Bill Matuszeski, director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Chesapeake Bay Program, "BayScapes is not only important for what it does and for the way it is going to help the Chesapeake, it's also important for the example it sets." He proceeded to thank Fort Meade for setting an example that the EPA will follow. The agency is in the process of building a \$50 million research laboratory on the installation. As

a result of Fort Meade's efforts, the EPA has revised the building's landscaping plan to fully BayScape the site.

Mr. Jaime Geiger, USF&WS assistant regional director for Southern Geographical Area Region 5, commended the participants for their successful partnerships and emphasized the importance of synergism - where the overall product is greater than the sum of its parts. "What you do to reduce excess nutrients here today," he said, "is going to be multiplied in a synergistic manner to improve the overall quality of water in the Chesapeake Bay for the fish and wildlife species, the critters, the habitat, and ultimately the people who enjoy this fine area."

Retired Maryland State Senator Bernie Fowler talked about his 30-year fight to convince the state government and local citizens that the Bay needed help. According to the senator, no one took him seriously when he first starting talking about the Bay's ailments. Over the years, though, as environmental studies and public education took hold, people began to take notice and get involved. "I feel great today because my concerns are being addressed," said Fowler.

To help draw public attention to the Bay, Fowler conducts an annual "sneaker index" where he wades out into the water of the lower Patuxent River and sees how far he can go before losing site of his white sneakers. The measurement is a home-made version of the Secchi disk that scientist use to measure water clarity. Fowler has noticed definite improvements since he began the sneaker survey in 1986. Those first measurements were only 11 inches. Last year, he waded out to 44 inches before losing site of his sneakers.

Fowler attributes the significant improvements in the sneaker index to the Bay Program's cleanup efforts. He said that programs, like BayScapes,

will help further restore the Bay, which is so vital to the people who live in the State of Maryland. "The heart of Maryland is the Chesapeake Bay," he said. "If anything happens to the Bay, the heart of Maryland will stop beating."

Following the opening ceremonies, the volunteers dug 2,800 holes and filled them in with 35 different types of grasses, plants, shrubs, and trees. According to Bill Harmeyer, environmental scientist with Fort Meade's Directorate of Public Works (DPW), this will not be the installation's only BayScapes site. In the near future, the post plans to plant a wildflower meadow near the first demonstration site; a butterfly garden on the golf course; and a conservation landscaping area, complete with educational signs, around the DPW office. The goal of these demonstration sites, said Harmeyer, is to help educate people about the beauty and benefits of native plants and encourage them to use native plants when they are planting a garden around their home.