

# Where a Puddle Persists, Lotuses Bloom

By Joe Lapp

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Since last winter, a wetland has been emerging in the grassy field across the street from my house, at Douglas Street and Anacostia Avenue in Northeast. The field is part of the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens but is outside the fence that surrounds the garden's ponds.

The first unusual sign was a large puddle that stayed long after the other puddles from heavy rains had disappeared. When I went to investigate this phenomenon, I found a small stream of water gushing from ordinary earth in the middle of the field. "Like water from a rock," I thought, though I had seen no Moses strike or speak to the ground.

The water, clear and cool, flowed along the contour of the land until it filled a low area by some trees and formed the large puddle. From there, it spilled under the tall fence into the aquatic gardens and ran into the upper pond that Buster the snapping turtle sometimes inhabits.

All through the winter and spring the water flowed.

Doug Rowley, the gardener at the lily ponds, says the stream came from a water main break. When spring came, tractors mowing the field almost got stuck in the mud from the puddle. They stopped mowing the soggy area and let it grow.

"How nice," I thought. "I'll get to watch a field become a meadow." I didn't yet know I'd get to see a wetland grow as well.

I paid little attention to the puddle then, because I was busy and the summer was hot, only glancing that way now and again to see if the puddle was still there and the water still flowing. In late summer, after being away for a while, I decided to investigate again.

To my surprise and delight, the puddle was no longer a puddle; it had become a marsh. Duckweed covered the surface of the water. Dragonflies buzzed and dived. Small frogs leapt about. Cattail reeds four feet tall stuck out from moist earth. And there, in the middle, lotus leaves hovered a foot or two above the water.

I remembered then the geese that had come to shelter there all winter and spring, perhaps bearing seeds from the adjacent marsh on their wet, webbed feet.

Doug says that when Hurricane Isabel flooded the Anacostia River and the ponds two summers ago, the floodwaters reached up as far as the field and might have deposited the lotus seeds. One way or another, seeds came. When the water kept flowing from the main break and the sun shone, they grew.

If that water keeps coming from the ground, then I suppose the wetland will thrive and grow new plants.

When it gets cold, the geese might come and shelter there again, transporting more varieties of marsh growth. By next spring, perhaps a button bush or iris seed will find its way to the puddle, or maybe some pickerel weed will sprout, or perhaps even a water lily tuber will somehow get there and begin to grow.

Government officials, I'm sure, didn't budget for this experiment in wetlands creation. I'll be watching, waiting, hoping that the funding source for this impromptu laboratory doesn't dry up.

*Joe Lapp, a waiter, writer and community historian, grew up in Kenilworth and was a junior ranger at the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens. He moved back to the neighborhood 2 1/2 years ago and has been active in forming a "Friends of" group for the park.*