



My Experience as a First-Year Lead Steward

By Laura Muntean

Background: I am a first-year lead steward that is working with Gary James, the other lead steward at the Betty Sutherland Site. Last year, I volunteered for several weeks at the Glen Stewart Site, where I learned much of my hands-on knowledge for stewardship from Cherie & Sylvie. Previously, I had very little knowledge of ecology or plants, and got started with the Toronto Nature Stewards when I was teaching students about invasive plants and discovered this program.

Stewarding has been a really rewarding experience. It's been a great way to make an impact, learn more about plants and ecology in a hands-on way, and regain hope that we can all make a difference. It's been so great to find so many people that are also committed to getting involved.

Another benefit of being a lead steward is that the challenges I face give me many opportunities to learn new skills or apply old ones in new ways. Overall, it's been an amazing experience being a part of a diverse community working towards a common goal.

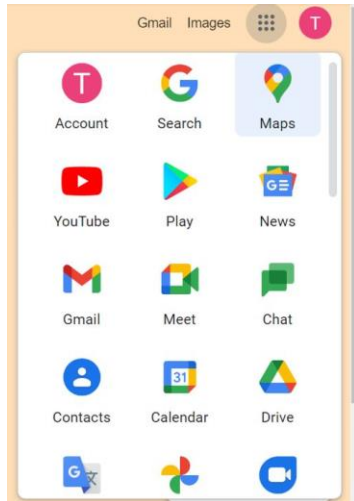
The following are tips that I believe are helpful for successful stewarding (many of these are based off of slides from training that applied to my experience):



Organization

- 1) **Just start your first event** - our first event was a clean up, as we waited for approval of our site. Leading up to it, I was worried about so many aspects of the organization of the event. Despite my worries, it turned out to be an exciting event with a great turnout. My takeaway was that it doesn't have to be perfect, and you don't have to know everything. The most important thing is to get started and work when you can. If you encounter any barriers to hosting events, it's good to identify what they are: do you need support and guidance, is it a time management or organization issue?
- 2) **Set realistic goals and be flexible** - before starting out, I considered all my personal, work, and any other responsibilities and set a schedule for stewardship that I felt I could maintain for the year. It also helped me to consider the area I wanted to start on. I also had the experience that I may have planned for one thing, but circumstances, number of volunteers, weather, etc impacted my stewardship plans, so being ready to adapt to those changes is important. To help with this, I have started think about a "small group" and "large group" plan everytime we have an event.

3) **These are the Google tools that I use to stay organized:**



a) **Google calendar** - keep track of events & people, easily send communication to contacts, easily attach & access plant info sheets, location & other important info in one place, auto reminders (notifications)

b) **Google site** - keep track of updates at the site, bonus: integration with your calendar so everyone knows when events are happening if they were missed in an email

c) **Google forms** - getting input from volunteers

Volunteers

4) **Start with friends, family, even co-workers, before you expand** - My approach was to discuss my training and introduce TNS to my friends, who were eager to volunteer. They were amazing sources of support especially through the first few events. Through word of mouth, they helped bring other volunteers. After the first few weeks, we had many events in which only 1-4 people came when I might have expected more, however I found that it is really important to ensure that those volunteers are really appreciated. I also think that smaller events are just as important, because they may give you opportunities to take more time to assess your site or do other things which you may not be able to do with larger events. While not a guarantee of an increase in volunteers, asking for their availability and trying out a different time, may also be helpful.

5) **Have an open mind, practice a growth mindset and be ready to make lots of mistakes** - I had limited knowledge of plants in general when I first started, and was wrong on several occasions (ex. I misidentified DSV sprouts as a native plant, because I was only familiar with the plants' appearance during the middle of summer), but I accepted that this is part of learning, admitted my mistakes and fortunately people were receptive. Often this helps other volunteers feel more confident as well, when they see that a "lead" can make mistakes too! I found it helped me feel more confident when I approached events as "learning together", as opposed to me being an "expert", and perhaps volunteers felt more confident too, as they were helping to contribute to our shared knowledge as we learned to identify different plants.



- 6) **Be inclusive** - From the beginning, I tried to keep open communication about everything and include everyone - I sent emails, and now I've made a site for the same purpose. Regardless of how it's done, I think the most important thing is to ensure that everyone is informed of what is going on, even if they didn't attend an event, as this is how you can start to form a community that will feel connected and feel drawn to return. I have also noticed that many people really enjoy being highlighted for making a specific contribution every session in the updates, which was something Gary inspired me to do.



- 7) **Be patient & accept feedback** - many volunteers may not have knowledge about plants but the desire to do something is strong, so they will return often. Sometimes these volunteers may end up being a great source for getting a more diverse crowd to join and may give a different perspective on things. Everyone has strengths and will contribute in surprising ways if given the chance. As I'm getting to know the Betty Sutherland volunteers' interests and motivations, I'm also looking at ways to give them more opportunities to share their knowledge, learnings and perspectives.

Site Management & Resources

Stewardship Site Location map: Features and Management Units



Physical Characteristics:

Management Unit	Exposure	Area (ha)	Soil Type	Moisture	Habitat Type
1	Partial Shade	0.36	Sand*	Dry	Young mixed forest/shrub
2	Full Shade	6.6	Sand*	Dry	Mature Hardwood Forest
3	Partial Shade	1.31	Sand*	Dry	Young mixed forest/shrub

Peel ponds; shallow water deposit; sand.

<http://www.geologyontario.mndm.gov.on.ca/mndmfiles/pub/data/imaging/P2204/p2204.pdf>

8) **What it means to “know your site”** - I found that visiting the site often, especially with another lead steward, was really helpful in making a more specific plan that included short term and long term goals. Having volunteered at Glen Stewart last year also gave me a lot of background knowledge and a roadmap for how we might do things at the Betty Sutherland Site. As such, I attribute much of my success to having worked at another site, because it helps make things less overwhelming.

9) **Use the Bradley Method** - It is tempting at first to want to pull/cut every single invasive plant immediately as you see them growing, but it is a good reminder to remember the Bradley method, which involves freeing up space around native plants and working on a small section at a time. As such, I've learned that it's good to narrow your focus, especially if you have less volunteers. Sometimes I noticed we would get caught up in removing as many invasive plants as we could, and neglected things like identifying more native plants. While removing many invasive plants makes for some great pictures, I've found that it is equally important to know what native plants you are helping to support, and it also gives volunteers hope and encouragement that their actions are making a positive contribution. You may discover that you have a more rare native plant at your site, and that can really draw more people in as well. While I cannot know for certain, it seemed like the reporting of the discovery of a significant population of native wood avens at our site, may have helped bring in a larger group in the following event.

10) **Reach out to the TNS community when you're stuck** - Pat Concesi has been a great mentor throughout our training and her recent visit to our site led me into a deep reflection of re-examining our plans and goals for the rest of the season. Having Gary to discuss these plans with, as well as many others such as Anna Hoad and Anna Meng, gave me the confidence to continue making decisions about what to focus on. Whenever I get stuck, I rely on the TNS community, whether it's by reviewing the slides from the training, posting questions in the FB group, emailing other lead stewards, and so on. Everyone has been extremely supportive and I find that reaching out also helps if you feel discouraged to start or try something new.

11) Celebrate success - within the email updates that involve highlighting everyone's contributions, I also try to have a sense of celebrating the smallest of successes. Sometimes this can be difficult to do, but I find it becomes easier with practice. I know that some sites like Glen Stewart, host events where they enjoy treats. After our first event, I invited everyone to get ice cream. Having opportunities to reflect on the progress made goes a long way in sustaining the momentum.

Visit our group [website](#) for more details.

