

The Restoration of a Missouri River Valley Farm

Painting for Conservation

STORY BY *Theresa Long*

SERIES COORDINATOR *Gillian Rice*



Theresa Long

Theresa Long's involvement with art and gardening dates back to her earliest memories. Purchasing a Missouri farm, Bethany Springs, helped her to share her interests with others. Her enthusiasm for botanical art has grown along with the native plants in the restored habitats of her farm. Theresa is a retired educator with bachelor's and master's degrees in art and educational leadership. This background makes her perfect for leading native habitat tours and botanical art workshops on her farm and elsewhere. She is active with many conservation and educational projects in Missouri. She also exhibits her work to inform the public about the value of native species and is currently completing a commission of five native plant portraits in oil. Theresa's website is <http://www.theresalongart.com>

WE WERE NOT FARMERS. We were naïve about land-management beyond that of a few acres. But we were interested in native plants. We loved tending the land and learning about restoration. In 1995, drawn by the natural beauty of the creeks, hills, and history of the Missouri River Valley, we purchased our farm of 165 acres near Hermann, Missouri.



Amsonia illustris, shining blue star, oil on canvas, 16 x 20 in, ©2019, Theresa Long, Held in the Hines family collection.

Most of the farm had monoculture crops of corn and soybeans. Non-native fescue pastures and degraded woodlands with abundant invasive species filled the remainder. An earlier lack of soil conservation practices allowed the creek near our 1874 stone home to wash away soil and plant life when heavy rains came.

After 24 years of our conservation practice, our farm's hills and valleys now bloom as the ever-changing panorama of native species supports an evolving intricate ecosystem.

Our commitment to increasing the acres dedicated to native habitats has grown along with the size of our farm. We now have 202 acres, of which 135 host a vast number of prairie, woodland, savanna, glade, and wetland native species. We replaced croplands with prairie and wetland habitat. Woodland and glade restoration are gradually recovering hillsides once dominated by invasive species. Converting our bottom ground to a wetland restored a series of ephemeral pools to replicate what had existed in the 1800s prior to cultivation.

Tending, observing, and painting native plants gives me a sense of place and direction and enhances my appreciation for their conservation. In a recent prairie planting we included seeds of 115 flowering native species. In subsequent years our enthusiasm grew as even more species appeared. We have discovered native plants that were here all along and now flourish in response to conservation and land stewardship. This labor of love challenges us to keep striving to understand and improve these fascinating multifaceted ecosystems.

To share and learn through collaboration with other artists, researchers, and native plant enthusiasts, we organize public events at our farm. Our first opportunity to engage public interest involved coordinating with the Saint Louis Science Center and Saint Louis City

Schools: a daylong workshop for teachers writing a coordinated art and science curriculum in response to their direct experiences with nature.

In 1999, high school ecology club students helped us plant 2,700 native hardwoods as a soil conservation effort. Those saplings, no larger than the thickness of a pencil, now stand tall as a creek-side grove where they prevent erosion of the banks of Big Berger Creek that empties into the Missouri River.

With the Missouri Prairie Foundation, we sponsored festivals offering guided prairie walks, woodland walks, a native plant-themed marionette show, nature-related art exhibitions, and weekend long paint-outs.

We worked with the Missouri Conservation Department, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), and our local chapter of Quail Forever to include our farm in a USDA Farm Tour focused on conservation practices.

In 2000, our son, a biology student at the University of Missouri, took on a summer research position documenting populations of coneflower species (*Echinacea* spp.) in Missouri. That was when I first started painting native plants. My son obtained his PhD in ecology and evolutionary biology with a focus on restoration of native plant populations. His work as a botanist has had a tremendous impact on my fervor for botanical art and native plants.

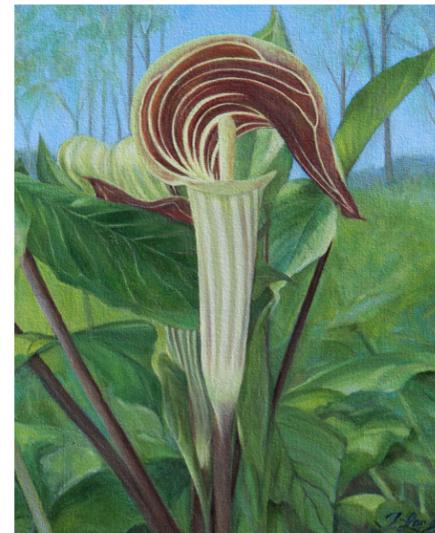
Now retired from teaching, I work as a botanical artist and teach painting and drawing of native species on our farm and at the Shaw Nature Reserve, a 2,400-acre private reserve that is an extension of Missouri Botanical Garden.

In 2016, Green Door Gallery in Webster Groves, Missouri, mounted a two-month exhibition of my art. My next exhibition there is scheduled for May through June 2020.

I participate in local art shows and exhibitions in the communities of Hermann, New Haven, and Washington—all historic towns along the Missouri River. This fosters among the general public a growing awareness of, and appreciation for, native plants.

As part of our local Hermann Garden Club, our farm, gardens, and my art have been featured in studio/garden tours with the proceeds supporting local college scholarships for those entering plant-related studies.

If just a small difference can be made by conservation and restoration efforts, and by promoting botanical art to increase people's knowledge about native species, my goals will be fulfilled. I work primarily from native plants grown on our farm. By recording blooming dates and specific locations over the years, I am fortunate to have an endless resource, not only for my work, but also to share with others. ☒



TOP. A prairie walk led by our son during a Missouri Prairie Foundation Festival. **MIDDLE, L to R.** *Arisaema triphyllum*, Jack-in-the-pulpit, oil on canvas, 14 x 12 in, ©2019, Theresa Long, Held in the Hines family collection. *Passiflora incarnata*, passion flower, watercolor on paper, 20 3/4 x 28 1/4 in, ©2016, Theresa Long. *Castilleja*, Indian paintbrush, oil on canvas, 14 x 12 in, ©2019, Theresa Long, Held in the Hines family collection. **BOTTOM.** A marionette performance that was part of our Missouri Prairie Foundation Festival. The puppet show is about the elderberry plant and other native Missouri plants.