



NEWS ARTICLE

Riparian Forested Buffers

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Riparian forested buffers clean up the water for all Hoosiers and are an important part of the new “Plant a Million” project for central Indiana. This effort has as its primary goals the planting of a million native trees and shrubs in central Indiana over the next ten years and to help people understand the importance of trees and their management. Visit the www.plantamillion.org website to learn more about how you can become a part of improving the central Indiana environment.

A riparian area buffer is simply a strip of trees and other vegetation along side streams or other water bodies. The buffer intercepts surface and subsurface water as it flows from the upland. The vegetation and the underground roots filter nutrients, pesticides, sediment and other pollutants from the water before it enters the stream or water body. Buffers are important ingredients to protecting water quality in urban as well as rural areas.

Trees in the buffer create shade to lower water temperatures thereby improving habitat for fish and other aquatic organisms. The buffer provides a source of large woody debris to improve habitat and food supply for fish and other aquatic organism. Small pieces of debris called detritus is made up of leaves, blooms and other pieces of vegetation are very important food sources for aquatic organisms, which then become food for larger organisms and fish. Production of this detritus is a key function of the buffer. Finally, riparian buffers become important corridors for wildlife to travel from one habitat area to another.

The first fifteen feet from the edge of the stream bank or other water body is often the most important. Dominant vegetation should be the existing trees and shrubs or if planting is necessary, select local native species. Several species should be planted. The trees closest to the water should be species with wide spreading crowns so that they will provide shade to the water when they mature and will reach out over the water to provide the much-needed detritus. As with any tree or shrub planting operation weed control is very important for the first two or three years to get the best survival rate. Consider tree and shrub species that not only provide shade but also produce fruit, nuts and other wildlife food products. Other species can be planted in the outer zone of the buffer to provide a minimum buffer width of 35 feet.

Riparian forested buffers are important conservation measures in Central Indiana and will protect our high quality water by filtering pollutants from upland sources, providing food for fish and wildlife and by reducing water temperatures. The best riparian buffers just don’t happen. Good planning is key to any effective conservation measure. Your local County Soil and Water Conservation District and its partnership staff can help with this process.