



## PATCHES OF PRAIRIE

VALERIE WRIGHT  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
EDUCATOR/NATURALIST  
KPBS

## RED CEDARS AND THE PRAIRIE LANDSCAPE

There are cedars everywhere you look these days. It wouldn't have been that way in 1900 or probably not even in 1950. The prairie fires that kept the grasslands healthy for thousands of years also kept the Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) at bay. Perhaps a few individuals could be found in protected ravines, but cedars and fire don't get along.

Cedars are resinous with flammable oils that once brought to combustion temperature can explode leaves and branches into a super hot ball of flames. Small or young trees cannot survive the heat of a grass fire. Older trees sometimes escape only with lower limbs burned but continue to thrive and reproduce. Did you know that there are female and male cedar trees? The males produce clouds of pollen in the early spring that float to female trees and pollinate the tiny flowers. The females produce the familiar blue cedar berries that flocks of robins and cedar waxwings descend upon in late winter. Once the seed in that berry is cleaned by bird digestive juices and excreted in a suitable place, it can germinate. The bird is a necessary part of the spread of cedars just as fire is a necessary tool in their control.

You can guess why cedars have become an invasive species in the Great Plains. The European settlers didn't like fire. People today are frightened of fire and the damage it can do to property and lives. We have nearly done away with fire because we don't understand its importance as a management tool for prairie ecosystems. Ask a Flint Hills rancher about the importance of fire to his/her livelihood. Controlled fire is their mainstay.

If you have red cedar trees in your yard or on your property, perhaps you will commiserate with me. I enjoy the cedar waxwing flocks in winter and the ornamental blue berries they seek. The lovely Olive Hairstreak butterfly that uses the cedar as a host is a gift from the tree. BUT each cedar tree and especially groves of cedars change the prairie. The soil beneath cedars is no longer prairie soil. Little grows in this soil and the deep shade of the trees. Large areas of pasture with cedar populations no longer have enough grass for livestock or enough territory for prairie chickens. Many other types of wildlife find nothing in the cedar grove to eat. And what about wildfires? Burning mature cedar trees near buildings is dangerous.



Red cedar and fire - Photo courtesy of  
Comanche Pool Prairie Resource Foundation

Our peopled landscape is at risk because we have allowed cedars to mature and proliferate. This is why the red cedar should be controlled like the pest species we have made it. Let's educate others about *Juniperus virginiana*.

To celebrate the **10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE KONZA ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROGRAM (KEEP)**,

we're holding a commemorative t-shirt design contest. Do you have the perfect idea for a new t-shirt design? As a Friends of Konza Prairie member, decide what makes Konza Prairie and the education program special to you and submit your idea! Visit the KEEP website for the official entry form and guidelines.

([www.ksu.edu/konza/keep/entryform.pdf](http://www.ksu.edu/konza/keep/entryform.pdf)) Entry deadline May 1, 2006.