Students reclaim junk yard

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MUNCIE — Neighbors are applauding Ball State University students for getting perennial ryegrass and red clover to grow on a toxic, 15-acre site of a former auto salvage yard that also had been used decades ago for bulk petroleum storage.

“It really looks great,” said Joe Davis of Ribble Avenue. “It looked like crap.”

When Davis ventured onto the property seven years ago, he found shingles, semi tractor-trailer tires and other debris. A falling-apart office trailer for the Car Doctors auto salvage yard stood at the front of the Burlington Drive site bordering Cardinal Greenway and Michael Ellis Rotary Park.

The former eyesore is now a source of community pride, said Brownie Schenck, who stopped with her grandson in Rotary Park last week while biking on the greenway.

“It was a mess,” said Pat Wood, who has lived on Ribble since 1961.

It wasn’t easy to establish the vegetation on the heavily compacted, gravelly, infertile soil. The soil structure appeared to be cemented in one great mass.

“There were no pores, so water couldn’t penetrate,” said John Pichtel.

Piles of clay were trucked in and spread to a depth of 18-24 inches, and the clay cap was covered with another 18-24 inches of top soil before seeding.

The clay cap covers any debris the students might have missed during their cleanup of the surface and keeps the roots of the vegetation from growing down so far that the plants

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would take up contaminants, said Pichtel, a professor of natural resources and environmental management who led the project.

The students also used chain saws and loppers to eradicate invasive species like stinkweed, poison ivy, multiflora rose and Siberian elm; manually dismantled and recycled a sheet metal fence along Burlington; constructed a split rail fence; planted dogwood, sweetgum, flowering cherry, quaking aspen, flame maple and Shumard oak trees; planted sunflowers, nodding wild onion, purple coneflower and other prairie plants; and used chain saws and loppers to clear a walking trail through a woodlot that took over part of the site.

“It was a great learning experience for the students,” Pichtel said. “It was not just doing grunt work.”

The project required site reconnaissance, soil sampling and experiments in the field, the greenhouse and the laboratory to assess which plants were suitable to recolonize the land.

“There are right and wrong ways to remediate a site,” Pichtel said.

The students were thrilled and personally satisfied over the transformation of the property from one that was “still littered with debris, dangerous and ugly” into a viable ecosystem, Pichtel said.

The two-year project will help Mother Nature heal the site because tree

**ON THE WEB**

» See a photo gallery documenting the transformation of the abandoned Car Doctors auto salvage yard at thestarpress.com.

and grass roots enhance the ability of microorganisms to biodegrade hazardous compounds through the natural release of enzymes, oxygen and nutrients.

Paul Whitehair, the general manager of a food processing business across the street from the cleanup site, saw busloads of Ball State students spending hours on the remediation.

It was cause for celebration when the auto salvage yard went out of business years ago.

“It was a big improvement just when they left,” Whitehair said.

Pichtel says about 30 students worked on the project, some up to 250 hours each.

BSU partnered with the city of Muncie, the Ball Brothers Foundation and others on the reclamation.

The end use is likely to be a nature preserve, Mayor Dennis Tyler says.

But it’s still a work in progress. More grass, trees and prairie flowers need to be planted, more invasive species need to be removed, and the trail needs to be maintained and lengthened, for example. And other brownfields in Muncie are in need of similar restoration.

“It comes down to getting the funding,” Pichtel said.

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