

Introduction

In spring 2021, the Indiana Native Plant Society has much to be proud of. It is a vibrant volunteer-led organization with robust programs and educational resources, poised to serve a converging interest in native plants among many conservation groups. The years since the 2016 Strategic Plan have seen the celebration of INPS's 25th Anniversary, a surge in membership, several new activities to engage members, and success in the realm of conservation advocacy. This document summarizes the accomplishments of the past five years and the vision and goals that will carry INPS through the next five. It is the Board and Council's intent that this plan be a living document that will continue to be fine-tuned and added to as goals are implemented.

INPS Mission and Vision

Our mission: To promote the appreciation, preservation, scientific study, and use of plants native to Indiana and to teach people about their beauty, diversity, and importance to our environment. (Reaffirmed January 2021)

Not formally reaffirmed but carried over from the 2016 Strategic Plan is this vision: INPS envisions an Indiana whose citizens treasure and protect their native plants and the web of life that relies on them and who use native plants in public and private landscapes.

The Strategic Planning Process

In October 2020, a survey was developed by Council and sent to the 800 member households to collect their views about the organization's mission and programs, inclusiveness, member engagement and support, chapters, outreach and messaging, and the use of social media. Responses from 300+ participants were tabulated and shared with the Council in December, and Council members were asked to ponder the Society's internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats.

There followed a virtual facilitated planning session on January 6, continued on January 13, in which Council members noted accomplishments since 2016 and addressed what was still missing. From their input, a list of eight strategic goals was crafted, along with all the Council's suggestions for implementation. An online vote was taken and the agreed upon priority goals form the foundation for this Strategic Plan, which then was drafted and circulated among Council members for comment and revision prior to ratification.

State of the Organization

Looking at the past five years, INPS has much to be proud of. Much progress has been made toward the goals of the 2016 Strategic Plan, but some remain to be fulfilled. Here we take stock of our accomplishments and point to intended improvements.

A Vital Group, Unique in Composition

The Council takes note that the Indiana Native Plant Society plays a foundational role in promoting biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. Working on behalf of native plants, we serve not only the plants themselves but also the ecosystems they support, the creatures that share our Indiana home, the citizens who enjoy what Nature offers, and the young people whose future we want to protect.

INPS also has a vital part to play among fellow conservation organizations. Though our interests overlap, only INPS is dedicated to native plants, which are at the base of all life on earth. Education is our chief

function, and we hold a unique bank of excellent, free, accessible information that enables us to inform and connect with a multitude of stakeholders whose conservation aims we share. In the spirit of “collaborations raise more sails,” we seek partnerships with others to our mutual benefit.

A large, supportive membership makes INPS vital as well. We are a knowledgeable, committed group that brings together people of diverse interests and talents—growers, gardeners, ecologists, naturalists, and photographers at all skill levels. Amateurs happily rub shoulders with experts in furthering our mission. And we are unique in uniting those who enjoy hiking and botanizing in nature with those who enjoy creating gardens; we promote native plants in both natural areas and human-made landscapes.

INPS is financially stable, with roughly \$100,000 of discretionary funds in the bank. These funds serve as a cushion to assure vital activities can move forward even if there is reduced income in a year. There is increasing discussion on using some of those funds to pay for time-consuming behind-the-scenes operational tasks that volunteers may no longer want to manage.

Positioned for Visionary Leadership

INPS is unique among peer organizations in being volunteer-led, which brings to bear many talents and interests but poses its own challenges.

In the past five years INPS has successfully negotiated the transition to a Board and Council governance structure with clearer roles and responsibilities. The Council includes the ten-member Board, seven Chapter Leaders, nineteen state-level Program Leaders, and three heads of Operations. Given this all-volunteer organization, it has been suggested that people holding these positions could benefit from leadership training and more sharing among leaders.

In the hope of engaging young leadership in the organization, we initiated a competitive application process in 2020 for a student member to sit on the Council, attend meetings, be involved in decision-making, and receive a free INPS membership. Our first student member joined the Council that fall.

To facilitate the inevitable transitions in volunteer leadership, the INPS Council Cookbook was posted online in 2018, capturing in some detail the functions and methods of organizational communication, governance, chapters, programs, and operations. The Cookbook is a living document that new leaders are encouraged to update as they discover better ways to do things.

Growing Membership

In the five years since the last strategic plan, INPS has enjoyed steady growth in membership, now numbering about 800 member families with more than 1,000 individuals. Enrollment is conducted online using proprietary forms (with offline backup) and monitored by means of a member database which is printed yearly as a Membership Directory. Members joining the state organization are automatically enrolled in one of seven regional chapters.

May 2016 saw the formation of an enthusiastic new Northeast Chapter, which has mounted an active program of events, including co-hosting the INPS 2019 Annual Conference in Fort Wayne. Other chapters have gained strength in the past five years, with more members and more activities. An ongoing problem for chapter leaders is the wide geographic spread of the counties in the chapters, which makes it difficult to engage members throughout their respective regions.

One area that stands out in need of change is our lack of diversity. Activity photos on our website reflect that our membership is more than 90 percent white and 66 percent over age 60. This does not invite participation by a younger crowd or people of color. Recognizing the need, the Board asked for standard demographic data to be included in our member survey and has added a Diversity Committee as a new Council position.

Getting the Message Out

A priority of the 2016 Strategic Plan was to establish the organization as a champion for native plants and biodiversity. This called for developing an effective messaging strategy, new vehicles and technologies to reach a variety of audiences, and a comprehensive media campaign to convey our messages.

Being at somewhat of a disadvantage in not having a specific object to promote, like a nature preserve or land trust or public garden, we sought to purchase the services of a marketing consultant to help us with messaging and a media campaign. It soon became apparent that this all-volunteer organization would not be considered for grants to fund such consulting as we lacked permanent staff such as an executive director.

We made do and came up with “action themes” that seemed to capture the various programs by which we further our mission: *Champions for biodiversity. Nourishing the web of life. Bringing youth to nature.*

In quest of our ever-elusive name recognition, we were helped by changing our name from “Indiana Native Plant and Wildflower Society” (the acronym INPAWS suggested to many a pet-related mission) to simply “Indiana Native Plant Society” (consistent with most such organizations around the country). Initiated by then president Michael Homoya, this change became effective January 1, 2019.

We also decided to go bigger with our “small grants” program, renaming it INPS Biodiversity Grants, crafting a more equitable application procedure, and designating a larger payout sum (grants range from \$400 to \$1500). The program supports worthy research, demonstration gardens, and land management or conservation. Successful awardees must recognize INPS as a funding source in all printed materials, signs, or publicity generated through the project.

A Little Help from Technology

In seeking new and better ways to reach various audiences, we are aided by the Internet, a new web design, and a host of social media.

The revamped website was launched in March 2020, bringing improved navigability, more native plant eye candy, better coverage of chapters, expanded educational content, and a variety of new web tools (Buy Natives Directory, Plant Finder for Pollinators, etc.).

A truly remarkable development, and unique to INPS among our peer organizations, has been the popularity of the INPS Facebook Group, which now numbers more than 18,000 members. People come to the group for plant identification, landscaping suggestions, and sharing of photos and experience, and a diligent group of five admins tries to keep order when conversations go off track. Weekly postings about specific native plants aim to build up a repertoire of native plant knowledge. We often lament not being able to convert this vast group membership into INPS memberships, but no one denies the educational value and liveliness of the talk about native plants.

INPS has a more static Facebook Page as well, with infrequent postings that reach people who have Liked the page. We are now dabbling in Instagram and YouTube, planning to use them more extensively to appeal to younger audiences who can be engaged by pictures and videos better than text.

And, of course, Zoom has loomed large in our lives since the Covid-19 epidemic arrived in March 2020. INPS leaders are meeting virtually from their living rooms, and a Zoom meeting took the place of our annual conference, with the benefit that people all over the state could participate without a long drive.

Education and Advocacy

Among our proudest achievements in recent years is that we have taken the lead in offering good information about invasive plants around Indiana. We did this in the interest of native plants, knowing that invasive plants outcompete them and diminish their numbers, but we ended up supporting conservation efforts of other organizations as well.

A highlight was our successful advocacy for passage of the Indiana Terrestrial Invasive Plant rule, which put an end to the sale of 44 invasive plants in the nursery trade. The rule was passed in 2019 and took effect in 2020. INPS contributed to the funding of a field guide to these plants, with photographs and comparisons to similar native plants.

Advocacy may become an increasing focus of INPS efforts as climate change and development continue to threaten our native flora. We can prepare by alerting members to advocacy opportunities and train them up to be ambassadors for native plants in their own spheres of influence.

Meanwhile, our strong educational programs continue, with a string of successful annual conferences and the much-touted quality of the quarterly INPS Journal. Educational offerings on the INPS website continue to grow, enhanced by plant portraits and landscape scenes submitted by talented photographers to the INPS Photo Contest, initiated in 2019.

Nurturing a Love of Nature in the Next Generation

As our membership ages, it is imperative that we be able to pass the baton to younger people who treasure native plants as we do. We could be doing much more to reach children at all age levels, but we are proud of the two programs that are carrying this theme forward.

One is our long-standing Letha's Youth Outdoors Fund, which continues to bring children to nature by funding field trips to natural areas. Since its inception in 2008, Letha's Fund has enabled more than 15,000 youth to visit environmental education centers, nature preserves, and parks under the guidance of trained specialists and enthusiastic volunteers. The Council has fully funded this effort, and a new flower-spotting competition, Florathon, now approaching its fourth year, has supplied additional dollars for the Fund and drawn new members to INPS.

The other is the publication of the award-winning children's book, *Wake Up, Woods*, conceived, written, and illustrated by INPS members. The book showcases the splendor of the eastern North American woodlands through true-to-life illustrations that depict native plants along with the insects, birds and mammals that have specialized roles in their reproduction. The Library of Congress selected it as Indiana's children's title in the National Book Festival.

Nourishing the Web of Life

Wherever people use native plants in their landscapes, they are supporting all the co-evolved insect species that lie at the center of the web of life. But most gardeners are not aware of this. Rather they come to INPS asking where they can purchase native plants and seeking tips on landscaping with them. Two developments have exponentially increased our ability to meet this need.

In 2017, INPS adopted a program pioneered by Monroe County—Identify and Remove Invasive Species (MC-IRIS) to certify and promote nurseries and garden centers that sell native plants. Called Grow Indiana Natives (GIN), the program rewards native plant sellers and designers who agree not to sell or specify invasive plants. Initially this program had its own website, but the material was absorbed into the revamped INPS site in 2020. Invasive-free sellers and designers are featured in an interactive Buy Natives Directory that enables people to locate GIN-certified businesses near them.

In 2020 we at long last secured leadership (along with a deep bench) for our Landscaping with Natives team, and good things are happening apace. The team aims to bridge the disconnect between gardening, landscaping, and ecology, enabling people with any level of experience to contribute to conservation efforts through the use of native plants in their landscapes. Project plans include explaining the science in simple terms, a series of videos to assist people landscaping with native plants, updated plant species information, model garden designs, answers to FAQs, and materials to enable members to influence their homeowners associations and municipalities to be more native plant friendly. A growing partnership with the Indiana Wildlife Federation promises to jump-start these efforts.

Among coming changes, we have realized that our annual Mother's Day weekend native plant sale and auction no longer serves its primary original function, which was to offer a source of native plants when they were hard to come by in the nursery trade. With native plant gardening coming into its own, new sources are popping up everywhere, and we wish to promote these rather than compete with them. Consequently, in pandemic-plagued spring 2021, we are trying out an online auction of select native plants that will bring traffic to donor nurseries all around the state. The secondary goal of the native plant sale and auction was as a fundraiser for the organization, and it remains to be seen if the re-configured event will accomplish this goal.

Strategic Priorities for 2021 to 2025

- 1. Increase the diversity and inclusivity of INPS by building relationships with different age groups, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels.**
 - a. Promote INPS to a broader audience than is currently reached.
 - b. Promote Letha's Fund among urban youth groups.
 - c. Offer educational materials in Spanish and refer to exotic plants as "introduced" rather than "non-native."
 - d. Engage high school and college students in INPS activities (e.g., through scholarships).
 - e. Offer activities for families.

- f. Provide inherent bias training for INPS leaders.
- 2. Provide compelling tools for educators to teach the importance of native and invasive plants at all grade levels.**
 - a. Empower a Youth Education team to accomplish goals with new leadership.
 - b. Create a native/invasive plant curriculum package for teachers at both the primary and secondary levels, consistent with educational standards.
 - c. Partner with organizations providing native plant stewardship training to provide hands-on experiences for students.
- 3. Leverage collaborations with other organizations to promote biodiversity, support the conservation/landscaping community, and win INPS name recognition.**
 - a. Designate a collaboration specialist to catalog potential collaborations, foster information sharing, and set up an INPS presence at mutually beneficial events.
 - b. Build relationships especially with Indiana Wildlife Federation (IWF), IN Association of Landscape Architects (INASLA), Indiana Landscape Association (INLA), Cooperative Invasive Species Management Areas (CISMAs), Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Land Trusts, Indiana Academy of Science (IAS) and Indiana Historical Society (IHS).
 - c. Act as a clearinghouse for reliable information about native and invasive plants as foundational to the concerns of these organizations.
- 4. Support those wishing to landscape with native plants by providing accurate information, promoting worthy plant sources and designers, and demonstrating the possibilities.**
 - a. Promote and expand the directory of Invasive-Free Grow Indiana Natives (GIN) sellers and designers, and encourage those members who still sell invasive plants (Basic members) to become invasive-free. Add value to GIN by offering opportunities for sellers to talk with each other.
 - b. Develop a digital curriculum to reach gardeners at the basic level with essential information, to be hosted on our website and YouTube channel and linked to from social media such as Facebook and Instagram.
 - c. Develop website content on the importance of landscaping with native plants, focusing on their critical role in maintaining biodiversity and addressing this within the context of climate change and climate resilience.
 - d. Provide materials to encourage and facilitate HOA groups, community groups, businesses, and municipalities to landscape with native plants, highlighting ecological,

health, and financial benefits. Link to climate resilience and action on climate preparedness; address policy options, native plant ordinances, and potential legislative change.

- e. Use Biodiversity Grants, garden tours, and demonstration gardens to show gardeners what can be done with native plants.

5. Empower INPS members to advocate for native plants as foundational to healthy, sustainable ecosystems.

- a. Keep members informed of advocacy opportunities and effective techniques.
- b. Equip members with a persuasive pitch to describe why it is so important both to use native plants in landscaping and to protect native plant populations.
- c. Develop INPS branded clothing and gear that encourages people to ask about native plants.

6. Strengthen the INPS organization by emphasizing chapter engagement, good communication, and volunteer training.

- a. Train chapter officers in team leadership and promote sharing with their counterparts in other chapters.
- b. Engage chapter members in far-flung counties by organizing hikes in those areas and providing Zoom access to programming.
- c. Offer overnight field trips that all can participate in, building camaraderie.