

A Growing Concern

by Charles Kennard

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Young Alfredo rushed up to me to claim his reward for locating a songbird's nest in a toyon bush which a prior year's class had planted. It was November, and the fifth winter that White Hill Elementary School students were working with Friends to improve habitat along Fairfax Creek. Both wildlife and students are benefitting from our projects up and down the watershed, and while the initial impressions may be small, in time their effects will be significant. Students who laboriously dug little holes for young trees have gone on to become environmental professionals, and a Drake High School student we worked with substituted for his teacher, Sue Fox, a short time after graduating. Meanwhile, our trees have grown tall, bushes filled out, and native sedges and rushes spread along creek banks. Live oaks and willows planted by Redwood High School students to replace acacia trees and fennel, are now shading Larkspur Creek where it skirts the Niven property and, we anticipate, will provide a model for restoration of the opposite side of the creek when that property is developed.

It is a mark of success when native plants we have installed reproduce themselves, showing that we chose the right species and that creek conditions are not too degraded for seeds to germinate successfully. At Drake High School, new alders are shooting up at the water's edge, progeny of ones planted by the late John Walters and students in 1997. California hemp, a fragrant perennial in the pea family, is self-sowing from older plants we brought in. At another project, coyote brush seedlings are springing up through decayed wood-chips.

When, in 2004, funded by a grant from the Marin Municipal Water District, we hired a tree service to remove several dozen acacias and eucalyptuses from the Ecology Study Area, College of Marin property adjacent to the creek-side multi-use path, several residents of the area were understandably concerned at the change. Now a little forest of native trees—live oak, valley oak, ash, willow, box-elder, walnut—is the home of song birds and jays. Beneath them, natives creeping wild-rye and sedge are rampant. In neighboring sections of the ESA, volunteers are fighting back periwinkle and non-native blackberry, so we can plant those areas too, expanding our woodland. We hope all now see the benefits of these flourishing native plants.

Unfortunately, the non-native invasive plants will always be with us, demanding perpetual attention to stop them overwhelming our achievements. Broom is the best known, but as tenacious on our sites are periwinkle, Himalayaberry, fennel, non-native thistles, Harding grass and poison hemlock. Last summer, an after-school program called GreenPlay, led by Julie Hanft, made great headway against invasive wild onion at Larkspur Creek by digging up hundreds of little pearly bulbs—and taking some home to cook up. If you would like to help us with planting or maintenance, please contact Friends at info@friendsofcortemaderacreek.org or at 457-1147. You can find more information on all our restoration projects on our website.



White Hill Elementary School students and parents packed a dumpster full with brush in preparation for planting along Fairfax Creek. Teacher Caley Hirsch stands on the right. Photo by Charles Kennard