

The MAGC Bridge Between Gardening and Environmentalism

by Sam Wilson
2004

Charlotte Torgovitsky exudes the sort of enthusiasm for her calling that draws others to join her. When I met Charlotte at the Marin Art and Garden Center in Ross, to talk about her work as the organization's Garden Education Manager and Volunteer Coordinator, she gracefully fielded my questions while simultaneously directing the efforts of a stream of volunteers and participating in a planting herself.

Community education is an important part of Charlotte's mission—an approach to gardening that integrates native plantings and habitat restoration with traditional garden design. The MAGC gardens are open to the public and are a particularly valuable resource for people with streamside properties. Plants are labeled in the various demonstration gardens including the riparian restoration area.

The MAGC gardens have a history dating to 1945, when community activist and preservationist, Caroline Livermore, coordinated volunteer activities that earned the \$25,000 it took to buy the 11-acre property back then. Some of the exotic ornamentals that have been planted here over the years have personal ties to the community. For example, the camellias along the banks of Kittle Creek (a seasonal stream named for the property's previous owner) were planted as a memorial, and Charlotte sees no reason to remove them: "A lot of people have memories and connections with this place, and we're not going to destroy that," she told me. "At the same time we want to revitalize the gardens and create better habitat."

On the day I visited—the day before a major storm was expected to blow through—MAGC staff made sure that any obstructive debris, which might dam the flow of runoff, was cleared from the streambed. It was also a day of planting, when a group of Marin Master Gardeners (who receive an education in gardening from regional experts of the UC Cooperative Extension in exchange for volunteer work) was putting in starts of a native California bunch grass, red fescue. This is a low-growing variety that gets to be about six inches high, then lies down and spreads by rhizomes. "Our thought," she says, "is to create a lawn type of area that can be walked on occasionally during events, maybe once or twice a year when we set up tables to sell plants." Bunch grasses are particularly desirable for areas where erosion control is a matter of concern. In a sloping area of the MAGC grounds, where there have been problems with slides, Charlotte is planting several species of bunch grasses including purple needlegrass, California fescue, and June grass

In relatively shady, streamside areas she is planting native species including thimbleberry, sword fern, western azalea, and rushes. Native roses also enter into her planting schemes, along with both native and non-native varieties of dogwood and elderberry. She also sees a place for certain woodland plants from the Midwest, particularly woodland wildflowers.

The flip side of gardening is weed control, and although a wide variety of weeds constantly crop up, Charlotte is able to keep them at bay without using pesticides. "My first job here as a volunteer, six or seven years ago, was pulling up onion grass," Charlotte recalls, "and this time of year, when the ground is still moist, is the best time to do it." Onion grass first arrived in Marin gardens as an edible ornamental, but its invasive ways have made it a local scourge. The weedy character of another ornamental, English ivy has Charlotte particularly concerned right now, because she is seeing an increasing amount of it



*Charlotte Torgovitsky (at left) planting a native bunchgrass with Master Gardener volunteers.
Photo by Sam Wilson*

sprouting from seeds, which she believes are spread by bird droppings. “If people feel they must have English ivy,” she says, “I wish they would cut it back to the point that it doesn’t set seed.”

Charlotte is currently pursuing a broad course of study in natural history at the College of Marin, rounding out her knowledge with studies of subjects like entomology, ornithology and mammalogy. She appreciates the importance of animal life in garden settings, “cultivating” certain species and including them in her education programs. Her butterfly garden, for example, is a pet project at MAGC, and she provides monarch caterpillars and milkweed plants (on which the caterpillars feed) to local schools, so students can watch the entire metamorphosis from larva to pupa to butterfly. A new educational feature that she is installing in the garden-program cottage, a glass-sided observational beehive, will provide a window on the lives of bees.

Charlotte Torgovitsky leavens her sense of respect for nature with a playfulness that makes her gardens a joy to visit. Drop by for a self-guided tour. You might run into Charlotte at the garden program headquarters/classroom, the little green cottage behind the art gallery building, just inside the eastern entrance to MAGC from Sir Francis Drake.

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