

Sweeping the Watershed

by Charles Kennard

2005

When I saw the sign French Broom Work Party, I thought a bunch of adults was going to be fighting with funnylooking mops or something. – dog walker

The sunny broom flowers bursting from our hillsides often charm newcomers to Marin, like the founders of the Mill Valley restaurant La Ginestra, named after the plant that is a feature of Mount Tamalpais as it is of Mount Vesuvius. However when a favorite native wildflower display disappears under an advancing thicket of broom in a period of five or six years, the plant loses its appeal. Broom forms continuous thickets that destroy the diversity of native plants and also increase the fire danger for dwellings and woodland trees. The magnitude of the problem is obvious in March and April, when yellow blossoms are seen along roadsides and creek banks, blanketing hills, and scattered through woodlands near to people and their machinery.

There are four invasive species of broom in Marin, French being by far the most common— but often mistakenly referred to as Scotch. French broom has soft leaves reminiscent of clover, while Scotch and Portuguese brooms have straight twigs with longitudinal lines and insignificant leaves; Spanish broom twigs resemble the smooth stems of rush. They were brought here to



At the Ecology Study Area, Friends cleared a broom forest that fortunately was not old enough to have generated the large seed bank that usually perpetuates an infestation.

ornament gardens and to stabilize road and railway cuttings and, once escaped, lacked natural controls that keep them in check in Europe. In the Old World they were used in making veneers, cloth, tanning liquid, wine, medicine and of course brooms, but unfortunately no one in California has found a commercial use for them.

Biologists and ecologists have spent years investigating ways to control broom: chemical, biological, mechanical and pyrotechnical. In our area practical alternatives are soon narrowed down to the last two. As fire, although used by Indians for centuries over much of this continent to control brushy growth, can be used safely in only a few places, cutting and pulling broom are all that remain. Mechanized cutting if done judiciously and repeatedly can be effective; well-timed hand cutting at one foot above the ground, followed by bark stripping is a good choice on very steep erosive slopes. Pulling the whole plant out using a Weed Wrench or Root Jack is the most reliable technique, and many volunteers spend long hours applying themselves with these ingenious tools. Unfortunately, broom seeds can live for decades in the soil so for years, each winter, another little forest of broom springs up, and this should be pulled every couple of years to prevent flowering. Strong gloves are all you need at this point for wet season work, as gradually the crop diminishes, while native plants reemerge: iris, sticky monkeyflower, Indian warrior and a myriad of other flowers are the reward of the broom puller. Root-pulling is easiest in the winter and spring, but where broom grows in soft soil under trees, removal can carry on year- round.

Some volunteers like to observe the changes in their favorite haunt subsequent to broom pulling; others, perhaps more socially inclined, join a work party wherever it is. All enjoy themselves, feeling that they are paying something back to a beautiful land—and saving on gym fees. The task can seem overwhelming, but if limited areas are tackled, and systematically, broom can be kept at bay. In parklands, just as in gardens, weed control is a constant activity, to make room for desirable plants.

Persistent local effort is the only way to control broom in our watershed. Major land managers such as the water district and the county open space district have programs for volunteers, but only individuals and community groups can tackle the broom growing along the road or fence, smothering an urban creek bank, or moving up a hill behind a playground, house, or business.

How Volunteers Can Help Control Broom

For those of you who feel the urge to get out, exercise, socialize and make an impression on our watershed, information on organized and individual broom-pulling follows.

Marin Municipal Water District

On the third Saturday of each month, a work party accommodating families meets at accessible locations such as Deer Park, the Canyon Trail near Marin Stables in Fairfax, and Phoenix Lake. On the third Thursday of each month, a group works in a more remote area, such as the Yolanda Trail. By arrangement, district staff can host work days to suit a school, community service or business group.

Independent broom-pullers should consult with staff, and, if larger broom plants are to be tackled, must have their own tools.

Information: Volunteer hotline 945-1128; Craigslist; mailing list.

Contact: 945-1128; volunteer@marinwater.org.

Marin County Open Space District

Organized workdays take place in local preserves, including Ring Mountain, King Mountain, Bald Hill, White Hill and Loma Alta, several times a year. Independent broom-pullers work under the Environmental Stewardship Program, and can borrow tools. These stewardship groups are seeking additional volunteers: Charles Kennard (457- 1147) on White Hill, weekly; Linda Novy (485-5852) in Cascade Canyon, twice a year; Ruth Nash (461-3665) on King Mountain and Corte Madera Creek, weekly; David Minkler (381-6113) on Ring Mountain.

Information: www.marinopenspace.org, *Independent Journal* calendar.

Contact: Greg Reza 499-3778; greza@co.marin.ca.us

San Anselmo Parks Department

Organized workdays once or twice a year in Hawthorne Canyon, in cooperation with the town's Open Space Committee. Larry Nilsen (453-3500) and friends pull once or twice a year at Faude Park.

Contact: Dean Nyberg 258-4645; dnyberg@ci.san-anselmo.ca.us

Fire Departments

Corte Madera (927-5077) and Ross (453-1453x163) fire departments lend broom-pulling tools in the interest of fire protection.

Broom-pulling tools

Two designs are available for purchase. Either tool grips the stem at the base while the root is simultaneously levered out of the ground. The orange-painted Weed Wrench is all steel, and comes in several sizes, available through www.weedwrench.com, (877) 484-4177, Corbet's Hardware in Larkspur and Jackson's Hardware in San Rafael. The wooden handled Root Jack is available at Jackson's.

If Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed can be of assistance in setting up a community group, or broompulling practices, call Charles Kennard at 457-1147.

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