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Native plants abound in Cotati's waterways

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By Daniel Goulart September 2, 2010 05:17 pm

Taking a morning jog, a post-lunch burn off or an evening stroll with a loved one down the waterways running through and around mid-Sonoma County towns and cities, you'll see an abundance of greenery hugging the slowly flowing channels and creeks.

Majestic willows, springy rushes, succulent blackberries and humble mosses all entice native wildlife to them, making every walk down these peaceful paths a different experience; you never know what you'll see this time.

With much of Sonoma County taken up by rolling grassy hills or thick green forests, anyone who's taken a step out their front door knows the oak tree is the dominant woody species in Mediterranean California, growing many feet tall and living for hundreds of years at a time at the longest.

The Coast Live oak is one of the more dominant species, characterized by a dense, gnarled trunk (especially after reaching 20-70 years of age) and small, round, spiny leaves that make a majestic, domed crown above the tree. The long, dark acorns make this tree a favorite for birds, rodents, and insects alike as a home and a source of food.

Shading the water, keeping it cool and increasing how much oxygen it holds, makes this densely-leafed species important for our waterways, making them a better place for salmon species to live and breed in, while also dissuading bacteria from thriving.

Likewise, the Common Snowberry, growing 2-5 feet tall and roughly 5 feet across, with attractive white berries in tight clumps, and small, smooth, roundish leaves, is an important food source for birds like quail and pheasants. Growing from small pinkish-white, bell-shaped flowers, these berries are a good source of food for birds, but not for humans. Mildly toxic, these berries won't make you feel very well, with nausea, diarrhea, and fatigue the chief symptoms. Look, but don't touch.

Commonly planted in decorative gardens in decades past, these attractive shrubs bloom in June and July, bringing plentiful contrast throughout most of summer.

Another plant to watch for is one you typically see more commonly along the mid-coast prairies, but it grows from Baja California all the way to Oregon: "Coyote brush."

Growing up to 8 or 9 feet tall, this evergreen shrub from the Sunflower family loves to grow anywhere from canyons to coastal areas. With small, sticky leaves and off-white flowers blooming from August to November, this species is vital for wasps, native butterflies and flies looking for pollen when most other species' blossoms have long since dried up.

A secondary pioneer plant (meaning it comes in after the very first plants on a newly exposed plot of land), Coyote brush is attractive, draws plenty of native wildlife, helps reduce wildfires (as it's naturally fire retardant), and helps stabilize soil with a root system that extends for yards.

There are hundreds more plants that grow with these few samples, many of which only grow here in Sonoma County. Where we live is home to an abundance of plant life, much of it within a short walk of wherever you may be. And with the continuing work that Cotati Creek Critters does along the Laguna channel through Cotati, it'll only get better.

Daniel Goulart is a graduating Senior at Sonoma State University and has worked with Cotati Creek Critters since late last year working to restore the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel.

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