

The Community VOICE



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Outdoor education at Thomas Page



By Christopher Harrod September 13, 2013 12:00 am

At Thomas Page Elementary School in Cotati, students, teachers and volunteers from the community are getting involved in outdoor education. Suki Winship works at Thomas Page and is leading the project. Already involved in outdoor education, she has previously introduced students to an organization called STRAW, where students and adults worked with the Cotati Creek Critters, helping with the restoration project along Cotati Creek.

Winship wants this program to teach students the importance of local food, healthy ecosystems, and stewardship of our land by connecting students to nature in an outdoor setting. In this outdoor learning environment, there will be a combination of bird, insect, and animal habitats, food production plots, a wetland/rain garden and a meadow. By bringing students out of the indoor classroom and into the outdoors, Winship hopes to inspire her young students to become caring stewards of the land.

This outdoor learning facility will provide students with the experience of growing their own food, which in turn will encourage discussions about proper nutrition, health and local food production. Students, parents, teachers and members of the community will come together and restore parts of the school campus back to its native habitat. It is hoped that birds, reptiles, insects and animal species will flourish with the increased diversity of plants in the landscape through the restoration work, eventually creating a more dynamic and thriving ecosystem.

There are five main areas of the landscape the school is trying to restore back to its native habitat. The first step will be to restore woodland areas back to natives, with plants like Ceanothus, Madrone, and Coffee Berry. Bermuda grass and non-native annual grasses will be replaced with a native prairie, including among others our state grass, purple needle grass. The creek that runs through the school that is currently invaded by non-native blackberries will be replaced with local rushes and host plants, which is a group of plants that attracts native insects like our native butterflies. The plan is to turn the water-logged areas of the landscape into a thriving marshland meadow that will include meadow barley, deer grass, rushes and sedges that all are adapted to wet soil and our local climate.

Phase one has already taken place. This required sheet mulching parts of the area that will be planted later. Cardboard and compost are used in sheet mulching to smother weeds. About 60 students who attended were "wildly enthusiastic," said Winship when asked about this part of the project.

Winship is hoping that this type of program spreads to other schools.

"If all schools have habitat/food gardens, we can help our students learn to reduce their carbon footprints through eating locally and seasonally, composting, and growing food organically," Winship said. "We can help wildlife by building islands of diversity. We can help our students connect with the environment, which will in turn enrich their lives and help them to become stewards of the earth."

Looking to help? Their wish list includes getting a group to take on the project of building a shed and a couple of picnic tables, whether bought or built. The school project will also need help in October and November to plant hedgerow and insectary borders. Other volunteer opportunities are available. Contact Winship for more information at suki_winship@crpusd.org.

Christopher Harrod is an environmentalist, horticulturalist, novice mycologist and freelancer. An SSU alumni who promotes the stewardship of our environment, he has served as an intern and is now a volunteer with the Cotati Creek Critters (cotaticreekcritters.info). For more information, links, and to visit his blog, go to www.wildcjh.com.

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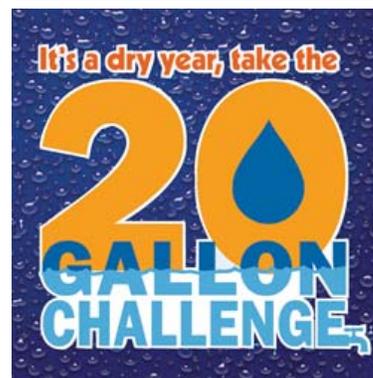
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