

A new project underfoot  
*The Cotati Creek Critters begin planting native grasses*

By Betti Lambro  
Friday, September 28, 2007 8:43 AM PDT

"Planting only trees and shrubs in a restoration project is like building a new house but leaving out the flooring," said Biologist Jeanne Wirka. "If the understory is not restored, the weeds will continue to dominate the site. A stand of weeds provides much less habitat diversity than a stand of native grasses."

During their 2007/08 planting season, beginning with a community planting day on Saturday, October 13 from 9 a.m. to noon, the Cotati Creek Critters will commence their new project of planting California native grasses under the established trees and shrubs that they have planted over the last several years.

With the help of the California Native Grasslands Association, Wade Belew, the Critters' stewardship coordinator, has been imbibing information about native grasses and planning the planting of the understory.

There are about 2,000 grasses, sedges and rushes of six varieties growing in cell tubes at RP's Ladybug Lot, the Critter's propagation site, waiting to be planted. These include *Festuca californica* (California fescue) and *Carex barberae* (Santa Barbara sedge) the basket weaving sedge used by Native Americans. A native honeysuckle, woodland strawberry and clematis will also be planted in the understory.

The native grasses project is being funded by an Environmental Enhancement grant that the Critters received from the City of Santa Rosa. The city was ordered to distribute \$250,000 to restoration projects as part of a mitigation settlement from a sewage spill that occurred at the Llano Road sewage treatment plant. Area environmental organizations competed for the sum with applications that in total requested \$1.6 million. The Critters succeeded in acquiring a grant for \$32,000.

"I think it is really exciting. In fact, I'm hoping to learn from their experience," commented Wirka, who will give a talk about native grasses October 1 as part of the Critters' Inside/Outside Nature Education series. "I don't know of that many projects that are attempting to restore the understory after trees and shrubs have been planted.

"Since they have used mulch to keep the weeds down around each individual tree and shrub, the area underneath will provide little shaded, weed-free microhabitats in which the native grasses will be able to establish with relatively little competition," Wirka continued.

The European grasses that have largely taken over our hills and dales grow to a height of four to six feet. During our dry summers, these short rooted grasses dry out and create a serious fire hazard. They also form a thick matting, almost like a mulch, that impedes the germination and growth of native tree seedlings and other native plants and grasses.

"Native grasses are better for fire management because they do not grow so tall or get so dry," explained Belew. They have roots that extend 10-15 feet into the soil where they can reach water stores longer into the summer. They remain greener longer and therefore pose less of a fire hazard.

California native grasses mostly grow in clumping or bunching forms with bare spaces in between. These interstitial spaces provide room for acorns to sprout and grow, "scurrying zones" for Western Pond Turtles, and habitat for many animals and insects.

Other advantages that the Cotati Creek Critters seek from planting and stewarding an understory of native grasses is better sediment and erosion control, improved groundwater infiltration, and less maintenance mowing since the natives do not grow as fast or tall as European grasses.

This last detail particularly appeals to Belew, who has been doing most of the mowing and weed whipping himself.

The Critters have also received a one-year extension on the grant that they were awarded in 2005 from the Urban

Streams Restoration program of the California Department of Water Resources. The grant period spanned two years and the aim was planting 2,000 trees and shrubs along one mile of the Laguna de Santa Rosa that runs through Cotati with the help of community volunteers.

Although individual and group volunteers have been numerous, the Critters did not meet their goal. The generous extension of the grant period until May of 2008 will enable the Critters to get the rest of those plants in the ground with the continuing participation of community members in planting days held on the second Saturday and last Sunday of each month from October to the beginning of May.

Jeanne Wirka will give a free presentation on "Native Grasses: the Misunderstood, Undervalued, Understory" Monday, October 1 at 7 p.m. at the Ray Miller Community Center in Cotati. The first Community Planting Day of the season is Saturday, October 13 from 9 a.m. to noon at Ladybug Lot. For more information visit <http://www.CotatiCreekCritters.info>.

[component:image-photo-html]

[component:image-cutline]