

Inside Bay Area

Native plants seek new homes, safe havens, volunteers

By Carol Anne Carroll – CORRESPONDENT

March 26, 2005

The Granada Native Gardens at Granada High School is thriving, but it could use some tender loving care.

Louann Tung, of Friends of the Arroyos, which maintains the gardens, says the need for volunteers is great. "We've been meeting about once a month to clean things up, weed and mulch," she explains. "As the weather gets warmer, we'll start watering every other week. As summer comes, that will increase to having someone watering every week."

While native plants take less water, Tung says that is true only after the native plants are well established. "It will be a few years before we'll need to water less."

In the meantime, Tung says, "The more we can do out there in the gardens, the better."

Recently, Friends of the Arroyos has received help from General Electric employees as well, bringing the total number of volunteers at most work sessions to 13 or 14 people. While that's a fair number of helping hands, the work is pretty intense, so more people willing and able to assist are greatly needed.

"About 20-25 people would be ideal," Tung says, "and I worry about people taking a break."

During the summer, when watering will need to be done weekly, volunteers will be particularly critical. "The gardens have to be watered every week, and at the same time, in the summer people go out of town quite a bit," she explains.

Even those who can't kneel or bend can help the Native Plant Gardens by keeping a watchful eye on them. Recent vandalism at the Gardens has Tung concerned, both for the health of the plants and for the cost of repairing or replacing plants, tables, signs and other victims of the destruction. "I think people need to know we've had that problem of vandalism, so they know to watch for activity, and if they see anything, call the police."

Although the vandalism upsets Tung, it is not stopping the momentum of Friends of the Arroyos or the Granada Native Gardens.

In fact, Friends of the Arroyos is teaming with the designer of the Granada Native Gardens, landscaper and designer Alrie Middlebrook of Middlebrook Gardens, to pursue a project that will help Granada High School, the students who attend, and the community at large.

"One of the benefits of volunteering at the Native Gardens is the opportunity to learn about and understand native planting," explains Tung. Together, Friends of the Arroyos and Middlebrook Gardens are encouraging Livermore homeowners to "lose the lawn."

Middlebrook's Web site, www.losethelawn.com, explains many of the benefits of native gardening in your own front and back yards. And Tung knows the benefits well — she recently had about 500 square feet of her own yard converted to native plantings.

"It's ten times less watering, it's ten times less work, and I'm starting to attract animals like egrets and butterflies, which are absolutely beautiful."

Tung says the reason for the savings of time and water is the fact that the plants belong in the soil where they are planted. "I have plants in the hot sun that love the hot sun, that never get much water in the summer, but that's OK, because they don't want much water in the summer. They're sitting in clay soil with rocks, and that's fine, because they thrive in clay soil with rocks," she explains.

To spread the joys of native gardening, Middlebrook Gardens will design and install a native garden at Livermore homes and businesses at their regular prices. Granada High School students are selling the service, and for each homeowner they sign up, are receiving a five percent commission for themselves and a five percent contribution to Granada High School.

Best of all, the process isn't lengthy. "Middlebrook will transform your yard in one day. They really know what they're doing."

So with all of the free time you have because your own yard is now native plants, you can volunteer some time at the Granada Native Gardens, too.

To volunteer, or to learn more about the Middlebrook Gardens native planting fundraiser, contact Tung at (925) 455-8823.

More information about Middlebrook Gardens and native planting is available at www.losethelawn.com.