

Gardens with Purpose

Story by Chris Calder

Gardens are never just plants and dirt. Even the smallest upstairs window box works out its purposes in the lives around it. Rainbow Garden, for example, is eleven years old this year. The quarter acre at Redwood Elementary School has given more than one thousand Fort Bragg first- through third-graders the feel, tastes, smells, and common sense of gardening. The garden has provided stuff for lessons in everything from biology and math to native myth.

“I don’t use a curriculum. I let the garden shape the learning,” says Julie Castillo, the teacher in charge of Rainbow Garden and the student garden at Dana Gray Elementary School as well. For the past eight years, Castillo has tended the garden, while its cluster of raised beds, and its roots in the community both have grown.

One recent May morning, a group of moms set up tables under a tent for a teacher appreciation lunch. There’ve been baby showers, a funeral service, retirement parties, staff parties, birthdays, Rotary Club meetings and Garden Club meetings, all held in the garden. That’s on top of the endless troop of kids who work, study and play there. Each week, every Redwood Elementary kid spends at least one-half hour in the garden.

The resources to do that have come from all over: the school itself, students’ families, individuals, local businesses and organizations. In a recent project, the Fort Bragg Rotary Club helped turn a toolshed into a classroom and kitchen and Soroptimists of Fort Bragg donated an oven. That kind of support helped Rainbow Garden tie for first place in the state with a Disney-owned private school in a competition of school gardens last year. The prize: forty-five big bags of compost.

Castillo’s usual method for getting compost is to make “lasagna”. Layers, each six inches to a foot deep, are put down inside a container: a layer of weeds, followed by a layer of grass clippings, followed by a layer of kitchen waste followed by a layer of manure. Repeat until compost box is full. The order of the layers is important since the grass clippings will heat up and kill most of the seeds in the weed layer.

Castillo has tried various kinds of compost arrangements—tumblers, worm-boxes. What works best for her are four wooden shipping pallets tied together with heavy twine.

A row of those big cubes sits out behind Rainbow Garden. Over the past couple of weeks, they contributed the potting mix for hundreds of plant starts made for the spring sale. And three times a year at least, each garden bed gets doses of the rich black mulch.

Castillo claims her lasagna recipe is truly foolproof. “You can’t ruin compost,” she says. If the bin gets too mucky or starts to smell, just add more weeds/grass clippings. If it starts to dry out, run a sprinkler on it for a few hours, or even overnight, she says.

A good compost and the healthy plants it generates are a main defense against pests.

Another is enlisting the help of other creatures. That starts with the students, who form an ever-watchful snail patrol. But it extends especially to birds. There are the chickens, who gobble up all the snail snacks the kids can throw their way. But having a good crowd of wild birds around the garden is also a help. A garden by itself will attract birds, but the biggest draw for them is water.

Rainbow Garden has a small pond and fish. The pond has done a great job of attracting birds, including the egret that spied that pond one day and made short work of the fish. Now the water is covered with a protective

net and a birdbath is being built nearby. Snakes and frogs are also welcome residents of the garden, along with the rabbits and guinea pigs huddling in their pens, and the chickens investigating their yard next door.

“There’s something about the presence of animals that makes the place more healthy and complete,” Castillo says.

Besides, each has their job: chickens and rabbits are constant consumers of garden byproducts that people don’t want to eat and constant producers of the manure that powers the compost.

A Green

A golf course isn’t a garden exactly, though at Little River Inn, renowned for its year-round blooming beds, the course has got to keep up. Actually, over the years he’s spent taking care of courses in the Bay Area, and now eight years at Little River, greenskeeper Terry Stratton says he’s learned to look at golf courses in a lot of different ways.

Little River was designed in 1957 by Ole Hervilla, who was not a trained golf course designer but consulted his own taste, and his friends, in laying out the wooded, hilly course. Local timber companies pitched in with manpower and machines to create the fairways and greens amid fog-belt coastal forest.

“If it was being built today,” Stratton says, “they probably would shape it a lot more, fill in here and put in drainage there. I think they stuck closer to the lay of the land.”

Creeks, drainage ditches and ponds crisscross the Little River course. Waterways, on a golf course or in a yard, are a challenge for maintenance and sometimes for pest control. But Stratton has found that encouraging natural plant growth and wildlife—especially birds—in certain ways helps keep the course in good shape.

Stratton likes to leave a fringe of long grass at the borders of creeks and ponds where possible. Mowing closely right down to the water’s edge is a more conventional golf course look and sometimes is part of how a hole is supposed to play. But the advantages to the grassy border where it can be used are many: pond or creek banks stay more stable; animals drawn to the water, often to eat bugs and other pests, have some shelter. Plus, longer grass soaks up fertilizer and pesticide runoff, reducing the amount that makes it into the creek or pond.

According to Stratton, Little River has reduced its pesticide use by 70 percent over the past eight years. He has a policy, with a couple of exceptions, of using neither fertilizer or pesticide within twenty-five feet of surface water.

Part of how he’s steered away from chemicals is to use plants that will do well without them. That often means native plants like redwood, wax myrtle, Sitka spruce, manzanita, Mexican flannel bush, and ceanothus. Stratton also likes plants that attract birds which, as at Redwood School’s garden, have proven good pest control at Little River. Currently, Stratton is trying to attract a barn owl, since they can catch as many as five gophers a night.

As far as lawn-care at home, the first thing Stratton usually recommends is to “aerify”. That means cutting or poking holes in a subsurface layer that lawns build up called thatch. Thatch traps water and chokes grass roots. Breaking it up reinvigorates the lawn and creates better-drained soil.

The shorter grass is the more water it needs, so Stratton manages his mowing with that in mind. He likes to wait until later in the summer to mow in rough or meadow where grass can be left long. Partly that’s to wait until any nests of young birds are fledged. Nests are pretty common in any stretch of tall grass, though you probably won’t notice when you hit them with the mower or weedwhacker. Stratton mows areas like that down to six inches or so. A lot of meadow grasses and plants won’t survive being cut closer than that, and that will make a dried-out, spotty looking patch.

About thirty thousand rounds of golf were played at Little River last year. That's a moderate amount for a nine-hole course today in most places, but among other things it's a main engine of the tourist economy here. Quite a few residents make the course a hub for their social lives as well. That's partly why Stratton has no shortage of takers for that most time consuming job, reseeding. Available anytime at the Little River clubhouse are little plastic jugs of grass seed and sand, which the golfers take with them, sometimes by the half dozen, to keep things green.

A New Start

Caspar's community garden is only a few months old, but it's getting ready to host its first dinner party. This ninety-by-ninety-foot square behind the community center has that location in its favor: right in the center of geographical Caspar.

Paul Garvin, who has been with the project from its beginning, says the garden was begun with a volunteer push in February and some crucial help from tenders of the Mendocino community garden. Supporters of the Mendocino community garden contributed valuable help and advice necessary to get Caspar's garden going. A couple of key decisions were made at first, Garvin remembers. One was to make all parts of the garden shared by everyone who works on it, not divide it into sections based on household or other group. Another was to build an automatic watering system.

Sundays were agreed on as gardening days, though this spring many of those turned out to be rainy. Still, a corps of volunteers encompassing all generations has fed the soil and done the planting and weeding. Right now, lettuce, kale, chard and broccoli are taking center stage, with beans, squash, corn and carrots coming along. Garvin says Caspar is getting ready for its first garden feast with salad from the garden as the centerpiece.

People in Caspar have been taking on a lot of community-minded tasks since large and central chunks of the town site went on the real estate market over the last decade. People organized around the fate of the land. Part of it is now set aside for public access, other land remains subject to debate over its future uses and, of course, to economic forces that the people of Caspar can only slightly influence.

Though different in scale and in many particulars, Caspar's job is similar to Fort Bragg's current challenge with the four hundred acres on its west side. According to Judy Tarbell, Caspar's community garden has been a natural fit with the larger effort and has been remarkably effective at attracting allies: Rossi's Building Materials, Mendo Mill Home Center & Lumber Company, Mendosa's Hardware, Matson Building Materials and Too Short Sales all donated to get the garden started. North Coast Brewing Company donated hops for compost; Dirt Cheap, Heartwood Nursery and Dripworks all made contributions toward garden supplies.

The generosity with time and material which the garden has inspired so far, says Judy Tarbell, "comes out of a notion that communities should be sustainable entities."

"Clearly part of being sustainable is providing your own food. To the extent we can do it without trucking it in and using more fossil fuels makes it that much more sustainable. And you get to know your neighbors. It definitely fits into the whole idea of Caspar."

Forest of Tomorrow

There is a garden, a potential garden, connected with the four hundred acres of coastal land [near Noyo Harbor] that some would like to rechristen Noyo Headlands. This potential garden is centered on the now-vacant cluster of greenhouses near the former [Fort Bragg] mill site's southeastern edge. That was the tree nursery, where redwood and Douglas fir seedlings by the millions over the decades were sheltered before being hauled up into the hills and planted. Here was what used to be called "the forest of tomorrow".

And many of those seedlings are the forest of today, but their nursery is empty. To some members of the Noyo Headlands Integrated Design Group, one of the groups working on planning future uses for the land, those

greenhouses represent possibility. Group member George Reinhardt thinks they could figure into what is known as "bioremediation," a certain kind of cleanup. One of few near-certainties about Noyo Headlands is that it will need some kind of soil and/or groundwater cleanup.

"Bacteria, oyster mushrooms, long grasses, willow trees, all clean the soil, but slowly," Reinhardt says, and things like these are being used more and more as effective and relatively cheap cleanup of some land contamination.

Just as Terry Stratton uses long grass at Little River golf course to soak up runoff, many environmental cleanup projects these days are using living things to transform soil, many time requiring facilities like greenhouses.

Beyond that, Reinhardt says, it is a good idea in general to include some form of agriculture in the mix of uses for the location. Agriculture, at least as much as any other type of business, has a chance to be a truly long-term enterprise, and it has always been a strength of the area. Industrial forestry is practiced as a form of agriculture. And for a long time, Fort Bragg and surrounding communities grew and consumed much of their own food. Peas, potatoes, eggs and sundry other produce were even shipped by rail to the Bay Area and beyond. Local farms, dairies, and hundreds of country gardens kept home and market shelves well stocked.

That kind of community-wide self-sufficiency is a thing of the past. Could a garden on Noyo Headlands help make it a thing of the future as well?

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