

Reforestation the Valley Floor – A Community Forest takes Shape

By Chris Benz

Stepping under the towering redwood canopy of The Napa Valley Community Forest is a magical experience. Light dims, air cools, sounds quiet, and a green freshness greets you. Barn owl pellets dot the ground, and branches interlace overhead. This forest is all the more magical because it is situated on the valley floor on the edge of the St. Helena wastewater treatment plant spray fields.

On Saturday, June 21, the public can visit the forest and participate in planting during the Napa County Resource Conservation District's "Community Forest Planting Day." Participants will also meet Paul Asmuth, the heart and mind behind the forest, who has fascinating stories about how the forest has evolved and its star species, the coast redwood, *Sequoia sempervirens*.

Asmuth suggested the project after learning about a fallow strip of sixteen acres on the southern edge of the spray fields. Trees could be planted and watered with the treatment plant's effluent. He and his wife Marilyn financed the first plantings on one acre, initially intending to grow a timber crop that could be selectively harvested while maintaining a forest environment. Coast redwoods are suitable for this because they grow quickly, are commercially valuable, and reproduce from basal sprouts, so no replanting is necessary.

Since the original planting, however, the vision has changed. Asmuth's knowledge has also expanded. In 2023 he completed his M.S. degree in Forestry, from Mississippi State University, focused on community forests and coast redwoods.

"The idea has morphed from a timber forest to a community forest," Asmuth explained. "That's why additional redwoods were planted less densely and why we now want to bring in more tree diversity and plant pollinators. Eventually, we'd like to offer public access and a walking path from St. Helena."

Since 2012, over 1800 redwoods have been planted. New plantings have been used to increase the biodiversity of the forest, including valley oaks and coast live oaks planted by St. Helena Boy Scouts. The new plantings are on either side of the "Founders Trees." These will be legacy trees donated by families who want to leave an environmental bequest.

The June 21st planting will include coast live oak, hollyleaf cherry, California buckeye, and California ash. Shrubs will include toyon, ceanothus, coyote brush, hummingbird sage, snowberry, manzanita, and flannel bush.

In addition to being a cool place to hang out – up to 40 degrees cooler than the grassy area outside, according to Asmuth – the forest provides excellent wildlife habitat, hosting rodents, coyotes, and over thirty species of birds from barn owls to rarely seen

grebes. It also provides climate and environmental benefits, sequestering carbon, slowing rainwater runoff, preventing erosion, and replenishing the aquifer.

Establishing a community forest takes more than just planting trees.

“You have to plant the right species in the right location,” Asmuth said. “Then you have to maintain it by weeding, protecting the trees from voles, and irrigating when young.”

It also relies on the help of community partners. These include Silverado Farming, who takes care of mowing and irrigation, the nonprofit Sustainable St. Helena, the City of St. Helena, the Napa Resource Conservation District, and Chip Bouril of the Natural Resources Conservation Services.

On Planting Day, ask for a tour of the Dawn Redwoods, a deciduous conifer species once thought to be extinct but rediscovered in China. Because they are dormant during the winter, they can survive in much wetter soil and are planted in an area bordering a natural wetland. Also, ask about the unique genetics of the redwood, dating back 200 million years to the Jurassic period and allowing for the diverse characteristics of the coast redwoods.

Asmuth looks forward to developing a teaching curriculum this summer so middle school and high school students can use the Community Forest as a living laboratory. He credits his wife for supporting this project.

“We believe that this will be a special legacy for many generations,” he said.

Actions you can take:

1. Support the Napa Valley Community Forest at <https://www.sustainablestheleena.org/donate>.
2. Sign up for the Community Forest Planting Day on June 21 at <https://naparcd.org/events/juneplanting/>.

Chris Benz is a retired winemaker and co-founder of Napa Climate NOW!

Napa Climate NOW! is a local nonprofit citizens’ group advocating for smart climate solutions based on the latest climate science, part of 350 Bay Area.

Info, napa.350bayarea.org

Photo caption: Paul Asmuth at the Community Forest with a young redwood selection from Las Posadas State Forest, Angwin, California

Photo credit: Chris Benz

