

The Community VOICE

Rohnert Park, Cotati, & Penngrove

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Cotati Creek Critters: A three year retrospective

By Jenny Blaker
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"Mommy, Mommy, look at all the trees we planted," said Maya, aged 4, excitedly. This was heart-warming for Cotati Creek Critters organizers Jenny Blaker and Wade Belew. Their goal three years ago was to nurture a sense of environmental stewardship in the local community, as well as to mobilize volunteers to plant native trees and shrubs on the banks of a mile-long section of the Laguna de Santa Rosa channel in Cotati. Little Maya's excitement, sense of achievement, and sense of contributing to something bigger than herself, shows that she, at least, "gets it."

Cotati Creek Critters began as an all-volunteer project behind a couple of houses north of East Cotati Avenue, in 1998. At that time, members of Cotati's Environment Commission were involved.

In 2005, the group successfully applied for a grant from the California Department of Water Resources. This enabled Wade Belew and myself, with the support of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation, Sonoma County Water Agency and the City of Cotati, to set up a much bigger project.

The City contributed the use of City well lot number 2 on Lakewood Avenue as a base of operations, tools - often recycled and refurbished - were purchased, and a plant nursery was established. An outreach program began to raise awareness and recruit volunteers.

Since then, volunteers ranging from 4-year-olds at the Cotati Coop Nursery School through Sonoma Statue students, to boy scouts, local residents, to retired people, have worked alongside one another in all conditions from hot, dry days to pouring rain and mud.

Cotati Creek Critters have partnered with environmental education organizations Acorn Soupe and STRAW (Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed) to bring elementary school children to the project. Now, where the banks of the Laguna channel were once denuded of vegetation, there are native trees from Oregon ash and black walnut to big leaf maple and buckeye, and colorful fruit- and berry-bearing shrubs - snowberry, twinberry, blue elderberry, toyon (Christmas berry), ceanothus, and the pink flowering currant with its dramatic, pendulous pink blossoms.

As well as hands-on restoration work, Cotati Creek Critters has held a monthly educational program, the Inside/Outside Nature Education series, featuring local experts. Although aimed primarily at local residents, participants have come from as far away as Mendocino and Albany to "inside" presentations in the fall and winter and to "outside" walks, bike rides, and field trips in spring and summer.

This summer, the emphasis is on getting to know the Laguna de Santa Rosa watershed through a series of field trips. Starting small scale and local, there will be an annual Creeks Bike Ride to explore some of the creek-side bike paths in Cotati and Rohnert Park while observing how water shapes the landscape.

In August there will be a field trip to the beautiful Pepperwood Preserve, and in September a trip to one of the City of Santa Rosa's farms, downstream from Cotati in the heart of the Laguna. In the Fall, Cotati Creek Critters will resume its Community Planting Days, this time with an emphasis on planting an understory of native grasses, sedges, and rushes - the subject of a future article! We hope that more local residents will be inspired to join us.

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