

A Volunteer Finds Her Niche

Lookout Point

After much reflection, 2021 was the year I worked up the courage to shift gears from a career that had defined me for a decade and a half. The question in every introduction was always, “What do you do?” And my answer was always the same. The opportunity to pivot slightly didn’t scratch the itch. No, I’m not meant to be here anymore, but where DO I belong?

I had some ideas. I intended to follow a path more aligned with my passions and values. I wanted to work outdoors, to protect nature, to support my community. But where to start?

Looking for clarity, I got out to Joaquin Miller Park on a hike on a summery day in August. I stretched my legs and my stiff back after sitting for long hours of Zoom calls, breathed in some warm eucalyptus-scented air, and headed down Sanborn Drive toward Lookout Point to take in the panoramic views of Oakland. I passed a sign for the native plant nursery in a green space I now know as the Sanborn Triangle Garden. I had seen the sign before, but it hit a little differently this time.

Volunteers Welcome

It was the sign (and start) I needed! My role while I figured out the specifics of my career change would be “volunteer.”

Beginning that following week, and nearly every Wednesday since, I have been working at the nursery as part of a community of volunteers—people from an array of backgrounds and with a range of knowledge, from novice like myself to near expert. It doesn’t matter how much you know, we ALL are needed. The introductions we exchange are not “What do you do?” but rather “What brings you to the nursery?” Every response is unique, but the work we do there brings us together as an unlikely group of colleagues who all have hands in the dirt and smiles on our faces.

Jay Cassianni, the nursery manager, is our steadfast guide for what we plant, re-pot, or prune each day. Jay doesn’t flinch at a butchered binomial pronunciation. He doesn’t get flustered at teaching what may be the most basic of plant care. Jay wants you to be there, and to be involved, and will patiently work with what you know. After a few Wednesdays, I was excited by how much more I had learned and how much more familiar I was with plant names and visuals.



Finding Community and Commitment

On the Wednesday crew, I’ve had the pleasure of meeting so many interesting people—many willing conversationalists who are happy to share what they’ve learned and how. I’ve chatted with a couple of the FOSC nursery regulars whose decades commitment to volunteering at the nursery I find inspiring.

The first is Alan. Alan has been a volunteer at FOSC for about nine years! What keeps Alan coming back is his dedication to the spot of land he gardens up the hill from the nursery. It's a project he started with a prior nursery manager and has kept up as a trial space for grasses. This space is the aforementioned Sanborn Triangle Garden, or "The Triangle" for short. This particular Wednesday, Alan is huddled in the shed with his laptop, creating a spreadsheet of plants he and Jay will pull from the nursery to plant in The Triangle. Alan says he's been particularly interested in some native annuals. He sees a lot of beauty in just one full cycle of life of an annual plant. He suggests I look up clarkia when I get home. It's endemic (limited) to California, and Alan lights up describing it—a stunning poppy-like bold pink bloom with a bright red center.

The second is Laurie. Laurie is a retired nurse practitioner who has been volunteering at the nursery for a year but has been a member of FOSC for many years. Laurie's entry into volunteerism at the nursery came after attending her first FOSC native plant sale. She wanted to lend a hand to the organization doing great work in her watershed and to continue learning for her home garden. Often Laurie and I will chat as we work side by side. Laurie has an infectious curiosity about plants—she told me about some plant propagation courses she took at Merritt College. The high praise she and other volunteers gave the program has directly influenced my decision to go back to school to learn more about ecology and restoration. I am finally finding my path to work outdoors, to protect nature, to support my community.

New Beginnings

On a wet December Wednesday, six of us dug holes along the fence line outside the nursery and planted an array of bulbs, grasses, and shrubs with Jay's direction, while another couple of volunteers gathered assorted native plants for the Winter Solstice Planting event.

In a beautiful misty rain and fog that obscured the view over Oakland, we warmed up quickly with the physical effort of digging and planting. Each colorful flag we staked into the ground to mark where a new plant now lived felt like a tiny celebration of new beginnings—much like my own.

— *Kate Berlin*

Please come join us for FOSC Native Plant Nursery workdays. Drop-in hours are:

**Every Wednesday 1:30 - 4:30 p.m.
2nd and 4th Saturdays 1:30 - 4:30 p.m.**

