

Bringing Back the Canyon



Black cottonwoods, rare in the East Bay, line the creek in Beaconsfield Canyon.

We moved to Montclair to a house on the rim of five-acre Beaconsfield Canyon in 1997, having fallen in love with this big, wooded greenspace in our backyard. For the longest time, we didn't know it had a name, we didn't know it was city property, we had no idea what was down that steep hillside just beyond our backyard fence. It wasn't till our kids got old enough to lose basketballs down into the impenetrable maw of ivy and blackberry that I got curious about what was down there. Staring into the knee-high jungle of vines, broken limbs and decades of duff from the Monterey pines and cypresses, one thing was clear—it was a fire waiting to happen.

I called the fire department to see if it was on their radar. It wasn't. I figured they'd appreciate the alert so they could wave a wand and make it more fire safe. Seems they already had plenty to keep them busy. But they did suggest I attend the next Wildfire Prevention Assessment District meeting and let the advisory board know what I had found. A couple of the volunteer board members got in touch with me and made some fateful suggestions: talk to your neighbors to raise awareness, start a volunteer group, talk to Friends of Sausal Creek.

My hands were pretty full working part time and raising two young kids, so the last thing I wanted to do was start a movement. Calling FOSC was the easiest and most noncommittal of the three options. FOSC's director offered support—publicity, tools, advice, plants—for our nonexistent volunteer group but also put me in touch with a couple long-time members and plant experts who she said might be interested in taking a look.

One of them was a neighbor up the street—Wendy Tokuda—who had been leading workdays in Redwood Regional Park pulling French broom. She confirmed the bad news. I was going to have to organize a work party. But if I did, she would help get it off the ground.

I printed up a bunch of flyers and stuck them in the mailboxes of all the houses surrounding the canyon. A small handful of people showed up. We started advertising online and in local newsletters. A different handful showed up the next time. Each month brought another small handful or sometimes two—a school group, a corporate giving group, a Boy Scout troop, a college community service organization. And sometimes it was just me and Wendy.

After a few months, and a few more wildfire prevention meetings, the assistant fire marshall came for a visit. Seeing as there was now a regular commitment from the community, the city had taken an interest. Beaconsfield soon had a place on the fire department's vegetation management schedule, and contractors showed up with weedwhackers and saws for limbing up trees.

That was in 2007. We've held monthly volunteer workdays ever since. We've hauled out hundreds of cubic yards of nonnative vegetation—not to mention a passel of old tires, sinks, bottles, cans, broken sewer pipes, blocks of cement and other remnants of local home improvement projects. We've planted several thousand native plants. We've worked closely with the fire department to coordinate clearing protocols, weedwhacking and goat grazing. It could still burn, as anyplace can, but it's no longer a tinder box.

Once the canyon became more of a garden and less of a jungle, residents stopped tossing their old tires and plumbing debris down the slopes. They started walking their dogs along the creek, and kids started exploring the hillsides, building mini-forts and putting up rope swings.



Volunteers haul out dead limbs and other fire-prone debris.

We've drawn volunteers from as far away as the peninsula, Fremont, Lafayette, and San Francisco. The groups change all the time, though we have a dedicated cadre of regulars. Some enjoy the comradery of the team effort—the satisfaction of clearing a large weed patch so it can be planted. Others like working alone, disappearing into the urban forest by themselves, on a mission. Like Connie Kozlowski, who decided she would rid the canyon of every trace of broom and thistle, however long it took. And she did. FOSC members Beth Keer, Karen Paulsell, Wendy and others have led crews and lent invaluable native plant expertise. Some volunteers bring a specialty or develop one, like Nelson Max and his son David who blaze and clear trails and take down fallen trees. A new volunteer, Jonathan Hirsch, recently moved to the neighborhood with his family, saw that our tool shed was falling apart and happened to have a spare, so he put it up and donated it to our cause.



Wendy Tokuda braving the slopes. Yellow tape indicates areas of sensitive plants for contractors to avoid.

The work isn't done. It will never be done. The invasives will continue to invade. We will never have enough volunteers for it to be a fair fight. It took me some time to make peace with that. But now, when our monthly workdays appear on my calendar, I send out the notice to our mailing list, and on the last Saturday of the month, I go down to marvel at how things have changed just since the last workday. Which plants are blooming or going into hibernation; which natives are thriving and which are struggling; how much water is flowing in the creek; which trails have eroded with winter rains or become overgrown with new vegetation. Usually a family of deer show up to stare at the intruder. An owl or woodpecker chimes in from somewhere high in the canopy.

Wendy and I talk about tasks for the volunteers that day, however many happen to show up. We've become good friends, and we talk all the time. But we no longer talk much about long term goals or visions for the canyon the way we once did. Maybe that's because we're both retired from our day jobs now—that age thing. Or maybe it's because the point isn't to get it done—to finish. It's simply to start. And keep going.

--Richard Kauffman