

"Wild in the City" at St. Mary's Urban Youth Farm

By Trinh Nguyen

Envision a beautiful park with native plants, trees and wildlife coexisting with people and their farmland. This is the future of St. Mary's Urban Youth Farm. This fall "wild in the city" Farm Field trips are giving youth at St. Mary's Urban Youth Farm a chance to learn about and restore native habitats in their own backyards.

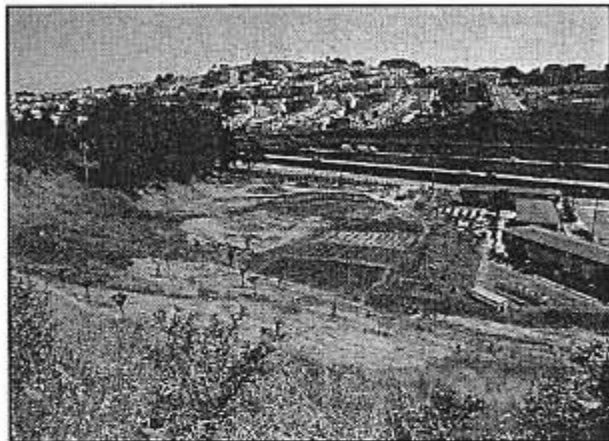
The farm will become a living, thriving example of innovative and efficient land use. The project integrates water conservation with easy-to-maintain native plants that preserve ecological balance—in farming projects that help feed, educate and employ the surrounding community.

The goal, says Alemany Farm Manager Daniel Green, is to "invent urban land and ecology. The urban lot can be looked at as an empty space or as an area to attract diverse populations of creatures—an ecosystem where plants, animals and people can interact in the same environment."

Almost half of the 4.5-acre farm is designated for native wildlife habitat restoration. First on the restoration list are areas containing remnants of the native ecosystem. Purple needle grass is one species found on the farm, and the leadership crew of SLUG's Youth Garden Internship has begun propagating this grass at the Golden Gate Park greenhouse. To maintain these species interns weed away exotic annual plants throughout the year.

The next step is to plant and foster native habitats. This not only helps wildlife but also creates a sustainable farm. Jake Sigg, of the California Native Plant Society has been working with SLUG to bring California native plants back to the area. Mr. Sigg is also helping SLUG propagate esthetically-pleasing native plants that host insects which are predatory to crop pests.

The farm contains a pond and wetland which is being restored with help from designers from the San Francisco Urban Team, of the Natural Resource Conservation Service. The immediate plan is to slow the process of percolation to prevent the pond from drying up.



The farm: restoring native ecologies, reinvigorating urban land.

Growing native plants in your own back yard

While youth crews restore native ecologies on previously vacant lots, individuals can bring natives back to their own yards. Native plants are among the most water-efficient, pest- and disease-resistant plants around. They provide fragrant flowers and a home for birds and butterflies. They are also an inexpensive way to create a colorful garden that will provide enjoyment year after year.

Below are some simple steps to growing natives, as described in the soon-to-be-released "Native Plant Gardening in San Francisco" brochure.

1) Prepare your site: Clear your site of weeds before planting. Learn to recognize young weeds and pull them as soon as possible. The less you disturb the soil, the fewer weed seeds will sprout. If your site has poor drainage (heavy clay soil and flat ground), create a mound or raised bed with the existing soil. If you need more soil, get topsoil

with a real soil base—not a potting mix. You won't need to amend or fertilize your soil to grow the native plants listed here—they do better in poor soil than in rich, loamy soil. Group your native plants together in an area separate from summer water-loving plants to help prevent over-watering problems.

2) Plant in the fall: The best time to plant or sow native plants is in autumn when the rains come. Sow seeds of annuals, lupines and California poppies directly into soil that is one inch deep or less. Be sure to tamp the soil down gently after planting to remove any air pockets. Most native seeds take about 30 days to germinate. Mark plantings and young plants with stakes or labels. When planting potted natives, first loosen the root ball to release the roots so they can grow into the soil. Then make sure the crown (where the roots meet the stem) is slightly above the soil level and tamp the soil down firmly after planting to remove air pockets.

3) Mulch carefully: A three-to-four inch mulch such as woodchips or leaves helps keep weeds down on bare soil between plantings or on paths. Be sure not to pile mulch against the stem—this may cause crown rot and kill your plants. Avoid mulching thickly around wildflowers if you want them to reseed themselves.

4) Avoid summer watering! Your drought-tolerant natives need their summer rest. Watering should be done only in late spring or early autumn if the rains fail.

5) Control slugs and snails: Native seedlings need protection for a planting to succeed. Copper foil barriers and hand packing are the best non-toxic methods for controlling snails and slugs.

A Few Easy-to-Grow Native Plants for San Francisco

For the best native-plant-gardening