

From River City to Oaktown: Tales from the Oak Saver

To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, "There are no oaks there."

Not in Oakland, not anywhere. We've done our best to erase this iconic tree from the California landscape that it defined. Millions of oaks were cleared to make way for Western civilization. And today, when a wayward sprout seats itself in an untended lot or the margin of a yard, it is typically pulled, poisoned, or shredded by the whirring filament of a weed whacker.

To make matters worse, native oaks are only occasionally deployed as "landscape trees" in yards or parks or along roadways—despite their tolerance for drought, heat, exhaust, and vandalism, and their unrivaled attractiveness to people and animals alike.

I never chose to become a protector of oaks; it was a calling, something I couldn't ignore. The course was set in 1970 when I organized a march of 6th graders out of the schoolyard at Pasadena Avenue Elementary to save an oak woodland that was in the way of roaring scrapers, tractors, and trenchers and a future subdivision of Eichler homes.

An environmental revolution had taken hold across America and in the minds of children at suburbia's fringe. The ultimate loss of that forest to residential development awakened in me a realization that the grownups didn't always know what they were doing and a passion to defend wildlands and their denizens wherever they may be.



Tim Vendlinski planting a rare Wiliwili tree (*Erythrina sanwicensis*) in the Waikoloa Dry Forest Preserve, Hawaii, in 2013



Volunteers from Mira Loma High School at Creek Cleanup Day 2012, Arcade Creek, City of Sacramento

The most formative period of my early years culminated in 1985 with a unanimous vote by Sacramento's city council to protect 100 acres of oak woodlands, prairie, and vernal pools along Arcade Creek. I led a campaign and helped structure this agreement to offset the loss of these same habitats for the construction of the Sacramento Softball Complex.

And so began my quest as an "oak saver" and "guerrilla gardener." Along Arcade Creek, I was working with three primary species—the blue oak, the interior live oak, and the valley oak—and a sprinkling of unusual hybrids such as the oracle oak.

Once the city ordered the cessation of hay farming, horticulture, and mowing within the new 100-acre preserve, thousands of oaks sprouted across this landscape as the

"heritage oaks" in the area were finally allowed to naturally reproduce. Even so, bad habits die hard, and many of these seedlings were mangled or destroyed by maintenance crews who lacked proper guidance in managing the land in a new way with new stewardship goals. That's when I started tending to the volunteer oaks with corrective pruning, fencing, staking, and flagging. I made friends with the most powerful men in the city—the men who operated the heavy machinery and cut the firebreaks within the park. They agreed to mow around most of the oak seedlings and saplings that I had marked (hidden beneath the waist high weeds), and 30 years later these trees comprise mature, impressive groves.

At American River College, my studies in field botany and ecology included lessons conveyed by Professor Aparicio that were profound and inspiring. I learned amazing facts about the oaks of California and all the complementary plants within an oak ecosystem. And, as part of my upper division studies at UC Davis, I helped craft the development and management plan for Arcade Creek that was ultimately the centerpiece of the city council's unanimous resolution referenced above.

Years passed and I moved downstream with my wife to be, Nancy, from Sacramento (the River City) to Davis and then to the Bay Area—first to San Francisco and then to Oakland. And just like those seedlings in the weeds along Arcade Creek, I found sprouts all over Oakland—along fence lines, in abandoned lots, and in yardscapes—poised to regain prominence in their namesake city. By then, I was a "conservation gardener" at home, mixing heirloom fruit trees with California natives, and a "restoration gardener" in the field, blending together key components of an oak forest, such as the trees, the understory shrubs, bunch grasses, and wildflowers. By the time my wife convinced me to move from the Dimond District to Lakeshore Homes in 2004, I had learned a great deal about Oakland's fascinating history and its myriad waterways, such as Courtland, Peralta, Sausal, and Indian Gulch creeks, thanks to the Oakland Museum and the Oakland Heritage Alliance.



A riot of native buckwheat species thriving along one of the adopted spots on Park Boulevard (sourced from FOSC plant nursery)

One of my most extraordinary finds in Oakland was the legion of selfless volunteers who thrive beneath the unfavorable headlines to make Oakland one of the best and most vibrant cities in the West. Chief among them are the Friends of Sausal Creek (FOSC) whose members have quietly established perhaps the premier community-based urban creek organization in California. In addition to discovering and helping to care for the pocket parks that the Olmstead brothers designed into the layout of Lakeshore Homes, I noticed neglected plots at the traffic circle at Grosvenor and Holman; the large triangle bounded by Park Blvd., Kingsley, and Excelsior; and a smaller triangle at Park Blvd., Park Blvd. Way; and Emerson. These were to become gardens for locally native plants, pollinators, and birds.

The concept is relatively straightforward but difficult to execute: Beat the noxious weeds into submission, exhaust the accumulated "bank" of weed seeds in the topsoil, and gradually replace the weeds with native trees, shrubs, forbs, and grasses. At the outset, I collected oak acorns and buckeye pods from the most venerable specimens in the neighborhood, like the gigantic buckeyes in Dimond Park and the 200- to 300-year-old heritage oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) within Lakeshore Homes that were already mature when the Huchiun Tribe of Ohlone Indians and much of California's original landscape succumbed to European settlement.



A stand of super drought tolerant "Point Molate" fescue (*Festuca rubra*) within a mixed grass "prairie" at the same adopted spot (sourced from Native Here Nursery)

I set up a plant nursery in my backyard and built a large collection of plants sourced from the FOSC nursery, Native Here Nursery, Oaktown Native Nursery, and from like-minded friends.

Once these plants were established in roadside gardens, they then served as sources of seeds and cuttings from which new plants could be grown to both replenish the home nursery and allow me to increase the density and diversity of plantings in each garden plot. The largest of the three gardens at the Park-Kingsley-Excelsior triangle eventually will be framed by a canopy of trees (big leaf maples, buckeyes, madrones, oaks), an understory of colorful and durable chaparral species (bush poppy, carpenteria, ceanothus, flannel bush, manzanita, sage), and a carpet of ground-level species (buckwheat, bunch grass, fuchsia, yucca from Santa Barbara County). When firmly established within the next decade, this particular garden, in combination with the work being done in the area by the City of Oakland and the Glenview Homeowners Association, will serve as an introduction to the Glenview and Montclair Districts.

My focus with these Oaktown garden plots, as it was in River City, is to create favorable and attractive habitat for wildlife. That's the real payoff—finding a nest in a tree, a swirl of diminutive bees on a palette of buckwheat flowers, a salamander beneath a log, and a hummingbird overhead.

--Tim Vendlinski