

SOUTH EUGENE HIGH SCHOOL NATURAL LANDSCAPING DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

Starting in 1998, NCAP began coordinating a natural landscaping project at Eugene's largest high school. The goal was to demonstrate how to design and maintain non-sports areas of school landscapes without the use of herbicides, and with reduced need for irrigation, fertilizers, mowing or manual weeding. We used historical and nearby natural areas as our "instruction manual," and aimed to create a landscape that was as self-sustaining as possible.

The project was in the planning stages for nearly a year. NCAP raised start-up funds, set up a project advisory committee, hired a natural landscaping consultant, and then worked with the committee to plan the new landscape. The committee included environmental club students, parents, teachers, school district maintenance staff, local landscape and native plant experts, and other volunteers. NCAP also solicited donations of materials, equipment, and even personnel to the project. Most of the plants were donated by a local native plant nursery. The groundbreaking occurred in October, and the first major planting was done in late February.

While some aspects of the demonstration were specific to the site, we hope that the concepts we used are ones that can be used anywhere:

1. Study the history, ecology, and current conditions of the site: In our case, the school was situated on poorly drained clay soils. Historically it was a wet prairie, with a nearby ash grove, and oak and pine savannah. Fill was hauled in at the time the school was built, and the drainage has been modified, but wetland conditions remain on much of the site.

2. Design an appropriate landscape: Our plans called for the restoration of a wet meadow and native ash grove in one area, and establishment of an oak and pine woodland in a second area.

3. Select the plants: We used only native plants suited to the particular site and conditions. In our case, that meant shrubs and trees adapted to growing in poorly drained clay soils, and in some areas, wetland grasses.

4. Prepare the site: In the fall, volunteers and environmental club students removed existing nonnative vegetation. We used black plastic to smother turf in larger areas where we planned to reintroduce native wet prairie grasses and flowers. We used newspapers covered with leaves to kill lawn in other areas where we intended to create a woodland with soil higher in organic matter.

5. Plant: Nearly 40 volunteers planted and 'watered-in' over 130 native trees and shrubs. New trees were mulched with porous landscape fabric to suppress weeds for the first two years. Grasses and forbs were planted later in the spring and fall, with the goal of covering every square inch of soil with wanted plants, or with newspapers or leaf mulch to suppress weeds naturally.

6. Care for the new landscape: Volunteer crews were set up to water the new trees and shrubs during the sum-

mer for the first two years. We are tolerating some weeds, and hand pulling others. We will continue to weed until desired plants become mature enough to shade or crowd out unwanted plants. Some plants considered weeds, such as horsetail, have colonized parts of our site. While we did not intentionally plant them, they are native plants here, and suited to the wet, clay soils. We are working to incorporate these plants into the natural landscape. Our goal is to let nature take its course, with only light-handed human intervention.

Other project goals were: to provide habitat for native birds, mammals and insects that once lived on the site; to provide an outdoor classroom at the school for biology teachers to use to teach students about native plants, wildlife, local ecology, water quality and pollution prevention; and to promote the use of natural landscaping techniques for the entire community.

NCAP hopes that others will undertake similar landscaping projects. It is important for all of us to promote economical, non-chemical weed control alternatives for our schools. —*Becky Riley*



Layers of newspaper covered with leaves were used to smother existing grasses and weeds without the use of herbicides. These materials will degrade and provide organic matter to the soil.

Becky Riley was a program associate at NCAP.