

Green Tracks

Growing plants and evolving young minds

Red flowering currant and Oregon grape were blooming abundantly in the native garden when I visited the Martin Luther King Jr. Education Center (MLK) in April. Buds were bursting everywhere on trees and shrubs. A number of burned tree snags, standing tall throughout the garden, created a striking and moving feature among the springtime flowers and greenness. This display of native plants and snags, I learned, is named Phoenix Rising. My guide Alan Butler, who directs the center's horticulture program, said the snags were salvaged from burn sites and erected here "to symbolize that Nature can recover from devastating events and so can the human soul."

The Lane County Department of Youth Services (DYS) campus houses a juvenile detention center, a drug treatment program and MLK, a vocational school serving secondary students who currently have an active case with DYS. The mission is to provide students with opportunities to develop skills needed to succeed in school, work and the community. The school offers three vocational tracks: horticulture, technology (computer stuff) and culinary arts. On May 22, the horticulture program and its gardens will be the focus of the third annual Native Plant Garden Tour sponsored by the Emerald Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Oregon. The event is titled "Green Tracks: Community Service in the World of Native Plants."

Butler has worked with DYS for 12 years and took over the horticulture program two years ago. He explained that students attend school while learning vital job skills through the vocational programs. Students in the horticulture program work in the farm and native garden or join an off-site crew doing trail work, campground maintenance or habitat restoration with the Forest Service, the BLM or the city of Eugene Parks and Open Space. Students also engage with the community at the Lane County Farmers Market, where they have a farm stand part of the year.

The goal at MLK is to increase reading and math skills while reducing the recidivism rate — the fraction of youth who go on to commit further crimes. MLK Vocation Specialist Piper Barry informed me by email that overall reading and math scores of students enrolled in the MLK Education Center have increased by two grade levels and recidivism has shown a 74 percent reduction.

"Many kids who have repeatedly flunked out of other schools have been successful here," Butler said. I asked



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Alan Butler and crew work with seedlings

how he thinks the school achieves that. "We engage the kids with the community. And we give a lot of positive reinforcement," he replied. "For some of these kids it's the first time they've accomplished something tangible, something they can actually see at the end of the day."

"Eight years ago all this was just irrigated weeds," Butler said, indicating with a sweep of his hand the acre and a half occupied by Phoenix Rising. Beyond that is the one-acre farm. "Detention was using less than 5 percent of this land when we started. We buried the lawn bit by bit and started planting. There are now 35 species of plants in the native garden." The programs try to be as sustainable as possible. The native garden, for instance, gets no fertilizer or water; kitchen material, sod and so on are composted on site. Crop rotation is practiced on the farm, and cast off tires keep tomato plants warm.

Thanks to an on-site greenhouse, the horticulture program grows its own starts for the farm and will raise peppers under cover this summer. Butler showed me a bee hedge newly planted along the farm's long perimeter fence that will beautify the area while it attracts beneficial insects. There are flower beds within the farm area too, and giant sunflowers will be added to this year's corn circle.

Fall leaves cover the garden beds when crops are done. An innovation this year, a deep bed of leaves along the inside of the fence is gradually filling up with potato starts.

At the free event on May 22, visitors may tour the gardens and purchase food prepared by MLK's Culinary Arts Program. There will be live music and a sale of native plants propagated and grown at MLK. Knowledgeable members and friends of NPSO's Native Garden Awareness Program will be on hand to answer questions about bees, birds and the benefits of gardening with native plants. All proceeds benefit the vocational programs at the Department of Youth Services. **EW**

'Green Tracks: Community Service in the World of Native Plants' features the MLK gardens from noon to 5 pm Sunday, May 22, at John Serbu Youth Campus, 2700 MLK Blvd. (directly across from Autzen Stadium — follow signs to MLK). For more information, email ngap@emeraldnpsoregon.org



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