

BECKY RILEY HELPS MAINTAIN TRAILS
IN RASOR PARK



A DAY IN THE PARK

EUGENE VOLUNTEER BECKY RILEY WORKS FOR
CHEMICAL-FREE PARKS BY CLAIRE RISCHIOTTO

On a blazing hot spring afternoon, Becky Riley lifts her foot in the air and stomps it against her shovel, grabbing a pile of dirt with her gloved hands as she gently combs through a sea of soil, wriggling with earthworms.

Riley stands in the middle of a mowed, grass walkway at the north end of Rasor Park off River Road, where she's getting ready to go head-to-head with a legion of poison oak plants. The 58-year-old has spent the past two years of her life removing poison oak by hand from the grassy field as an alternative to chemical spray.

Shovel back in the ground, Riley repeats what is a near-daily routine for the next three hours, and as time passes, her white bucket fills with poison oak roots. The roots are "networks," she says, explaining how the tendrils stretch far and sometimes thick along the nearby bike path.

Riley overflows with knowledge about poison oak and the 10-acre plot of land she tends to. She jokes that by now, she has enough experience with poison oak to run a university dedicated to the plant.

"I know that a lot of people are scared of poison oak, and they freak out about it," Riley says. "I'm trying to get more people to be mellow about it and realize, gosh, it's here everywhere, in the woods and anywhere you go out."

On a typical day, it is just Riley out at Rasor Park grubbing the land next to the river, with the exception of her partner Peter James and city employees who mow the park a few times a year.

NO SPRAY

Riley has volunteered in Rasor Park since the 1990s, but the poison oak grubbing started more recently. Two years ago, Riley says, the city of Eugene planned to spray the park with a chemical, Garlon 3A, which contains the active ingredient triclopyr, an herbicide. Riley has been working to prevent the use of pesticides since 1987, when she first volunteered and later worked for the Northwest Center for Alternatives to Pesticides (NCAP) in Eugene. When she heard about the proposed chemical spray, she responded by researching the chemical.

In a two-page email to the city, Riley explained the harmful effects the chemical can have even after the substance is sprayed.

"The developing nervous system of children, infants and fetuses may be at special risk from TCP exposure," Riley wrote in an email to Eugene parks and open space officials, citing published research on the chemical.

City employees agreed not to spray the park and gave Riley time to propose an alternative plan that did not include chemicals.

Following discussion about her proposal, Riley and the city collaborated on a new plan: Volunteers would grub and mow poison oak themselves. This arrangement with Riley was recognized through an adopted agreement with the city.

"I totally support Becky and her work," says Lorna Baldwin, the community engagement volunteer coordinator with Eugene Parks and Open Space. "I respect and admire her for what she's doing." Baldwin says

that though she did not have the final say over whether chemicals would be sprayed at Rasor Park, she did support and advocate for Riley's proposal internally with her colleagues.

ROOTED TO A CAUSE

Riley's environmental roots grow deep, and they started to emerge even before she moved to Eugene in 1987.

While attending the University of Washington, she studied math, but had other majors on her mind. "What I really wanted to major in was environmental studies. I was a little bit too afraid to do it," she says. "It was brand new — this was in the '70s. Everyone thought it was very impractical and that there weren't any jobs."

She explains her interest in the environment as "just who I am."

"I love hiking, I love camping and backpacking in the high country in the summers," she says. "I just love being outdoors."

As a child growing up in Ballard, Washington, Riley was surrounded by nature enthusiasts. Her parents, both biology majors, worked as teaching assistants at Western Washington College, now known as Western Washington University.

Even from early childhood, Riley has stories reflecting her upbringing around nature. When she was just 2 years old, she almost swallowed a salamander her parents brought home from work. Luckily, her parents caught her and pulled the salamander away from her. "I don't know if that's how you get into nature, but whatever," she laughs.

TEAMWORK

Riley's involvement with Rasor Park stretches back to the '90s, she explains. In 1994, the city proposed to build a soccer stadium within the park. When Riley found out about the plan, she collaborated with her neighbors to oppose it. A few years later, the plan was dropped, she explains. That's when she realized the land at Rasor Park was vulnerable to future development.

To prevent this, Riley recruited friends and neighbors to volunteer at Rasor Park. The group was called "Friends of Rasor Park," and members helped care for the park, coordinating tree plantings from 2000 to 2002, Riley says.

Today, Riley not only volunteers at Rasor Park, but she also supports fellow Eugene park volunteers such as Jen Hornaday, who grubs knapweed at nearby Maynard Park.

Last year, Hornaday explains, the city sprayed the park with chemicals. Hornaday collaborated with Riley, who researched the chemical, and both spoke with Mayor Kitty Piercy and Lisa Arkin of Beyond Toxics to advocate for reduced use of pesticides.

"She's awesome," Hornaday says, reflecting on Riley's work ethic at Rasor Park. "She's really compassionate about healthy land and soil and is physically mowing and digging poison oak, and doing really hard manual labor, a lot of times by herself."

Recently, Riley worked with the city of Eugene to buy a privately owned oak grove in the southern area of Rasor Park. The idea was, as Riley explains, to buy the land and keep it in its current state instead of possibly having a home built on top of it.

In the future, Riley says, she hopes to plant more native species in Rasor Park and continue keeping it pesticide-free.

"I really felt that it was important to have a natural landscape right here on the river," she says. "It makes sense to restore what was here instead of clearing it and putting a soccer stadium on it."

She continues: "This is the river. It just felt completely intuitive that it belongs to all of us as a public space, and to birds and critters, too."

To keep up with Riley's work or to help, check out the "Friends of Rasor Park" Facebook page.