

# Restoring Our Creeks is a Community Affair

By Jennifer Wake



Algae forms in warm creek water flowing over concrete behind Safeway in Orinda. Photo Jennifer Wake

Lamorinda creeks are a beautiful natural resource, both pleasing to the eye and calming to the spirit. With thousands of homes built along creeks throughout Orinda, Lafayette and Moraga, residents have an opportunity to enjoy the wonder of these waterways and the local wildlife it supports.

But with the tranquil setting comes added responsibility.

According to the president of Friends of Orinda Creeks (FOC), Maya Rappaport, even after the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972, contamination levels of local waterways remained high.

“The EPA was curious why contamination levels were higher than expected after so many safeguards had been put into place by industrial businesses,” she said. “Unfortunately, the Act did not address a key contributor to water contamination: homeowners.”

In 1987, the Clean Water Act was amended to address non-point source pollution (stormwater runoff from farmlands, forests, construction sites, and urban areas), now estimated to represent more than 50 percent of the nation’s remaining water pollution problems.

Geologist Cinda MacKinnon founded FOC in 1992. Rappaport, whose environmental background is in water quality issues, joined in the efforts of Friends of Orinda Creeks in 1994 because she was concerned about the lack of attention that local homeowners and city officials were

paying to Orinda’s creeks.

Thanks to organizations like FOC, as well as city-supported committees such as the Lafayette Creeks Committee, efforts are being made to educate local residents, survey existing problems, and replant waterways with native vegetation.

Unfortunately, the contamination problems persist.

“People are still emptying pool water into the street,” Rappaport said. “The water goes into the storm drains and directly into our creeks.”

All Lamorinda residents should remember that waterways are not just affected by homeowners with creeks on their property.

“Every time you press the brakes, copper and chrome, oil and grease contaminate the road. When it rains all the drainage flows directly in the storm drains, which empty into the creeks,” Rappaport said. “You can’t eliminate the problem, but you can minimize other sources of contamination.”

Changing to eco-friendly fertilizers and not washing cars on driveways can help. Even a seemingly simple thing like planting along a creek bank can be devastating to the waterways.

“Pampas grass and French broom are so invasive, it kills the native vegetation,” Rappaport said. “If the shade over creeks is removed, the water heats up and algae forms, killing important macroinvertebrates that live in there.”

A brochure on the San Pablo Creek Restoration project explains how native vegetation helps stabilize the creek banks and the roots help prevent soil erosion. Vegetation also traps sediment carried from upstream sources, keeping the water clean, while runoff from heavy rains is slowed down by plant life, allowing water to filter into the ground and replenish essential groundwater reserves.

Lafayette’s Creeks Committee, which was formed by the City Council 10 years ago, recently sent surveys to more than 900 homeowners whose properties line the creeks. Questions included whether there had been any changes in the creek bed since moving to the property, if homeowners had experienced any flooding, and if any modifications had been made to the creek bank.

The outreach effort will help the committee to identify potential problems at different locations, and the information will help the committee serve in its advisory capacity, responding to inquiries regarding development that would affect waterways as well as city planning beautification endeavors.

The Friends of Orinda Creeks board would like to see a similar outreach effort in Orinda. “There are more creeks in Orinda that run through private property than any other city in the county,” Rappaport said. “Policing these waterways is challenging, at best.”

Although any remodeling projects in Orinda have to go through a biological review, which outlines what homeowners can and cannot do based on this ordinance, Rappaport noted that if they are working without permits, problems can go unchecked.

Through organizations like FOC and city and town endeavors, word is spreading about how to protect our waterways. Currently, information brochures are given to every new Orinda homeowner with a creek on their property at the close of escrow – an ordinance the Lafayette Creeks Committee would like their city to emulate – and information about how to protect our watersheds can be found on a variety of Lamorinda Web sites.

The problem is getting people



to not only read the information, but to take action.

“There are a lot of embedded practices that are hard to change,” said Lafayette Creeks Committee member Jeff Gilman. “Everyone is part of the solution.”

For more information, visit the Friends of Orinda Creeks Web site at: [www.orindacreeks.org](http://www.orindacreeks.org).



Friends of Orinda Creeks President Maya Rappaport stands among newly planted native vegetation along San Pablo Creek in Orinda.

Photo Jennifer Wake

## Planting Day at San Pablo Creek

The Friends of Orinda Creeks (FOC) is hosting a planting day at San Pablo Creek on Saturday, Dec. 22 from 10 a.m. to noon behind the Buehler building at 19 Orinda Way. Volunteers will work to restore native understory species such as Santa Barbara sedge and creeping wild rye. Bring gloves and wear long sleeves and pants to avoid any poison oak that may still be lingering. FOC will supply plants and digging tools. (Heavy rain will cancel the event.)

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