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## Pruning Pear Trees

By Sophie Braccini



Jonathan Rowland (left) and Ben Magidson, students from the Leadership class at JM, help with the pruning process Photo Sophie Braccini

pounds of pears to the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

The Bartlett pears that comprise the orchard do not require any watering and never see an ounce of chemical products. "In other parts of the country Bartlett trees need cross pollination, but in our area, they are self fertile, something to do with the climate and the soil," says Lawrence Bennett, a Moraga resident and landscape contractor. Pruning is all they require. "The operation is quite simple," adds Bennett, "what we do is cut out the suckers that grow around the trunk, and remove the dead or crowded branches."

Dead wood is quite easy to spot because it does not bear buds; crowding means that the volunteers are asked to remove branches that are too close or crossing each other. The proper way to prune is to cut the branch close to the trunk, leaving about 1/8 of an inch in order not to scar the bark of the trunk. At the base of the tree, the suckers were cut at ground level. Every year it takes about four hours to complete the work. When done, a large stack of cuttings is piled on the school's property.

"We add our own cuttings to the pile and then hire a contractor to chip it and take it away," explains Rick Schafer, the Superintendent of the Moraga School District, who adds that the district is happy to see MPF taking charge of both pruning and harvesting. "We are not in the farming business, and without the Foundation the pears would go to waste," says Schafer, "MPF gets the insurance and they provide the equipment; this works very well for us." As to how long this will continue, the Superintendent remains elusive. "The Governing Board has chosen not to sell the property at this time," says Schafer, "it is too small to put in a sports field, the way it is laid out it is not optimal, and only 2.2 acre out of 3 are usable because of the creek." However, the School Board may one day have a use for that land.

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On the morning of February 13th, volunteers gathered with their tools at the corner of Canyon and Camino Pablo, on land belonging to the Moraga School District, to help in the pruning of the pear orchard. Pear trees were planted in Moraga around 1900 as part of The Moraga Company Ranch. According to the history book, Moraga's Pride, "The Moraga Ranch boasted 100 acres in walnuts and 38 orchards in pears, apples, apricots and plums. At one time, the Moraga Company conducted the largest pear production operation under one management in the world."

Moraga's pears are no longer a commercial product, but many 100-year old trees are still around and thanks to the efforts of the Moraga Park Foundation (MPF), which takes care of them, some are producing hundreds of pounds of fruit each year that is given to local food banks.

The fact that most of the remaining pear orchards were left unkempt, and not producing anything except small and unpalatable fruit, struck Moraga residents Tom and Stephanie Smith who had been active in instituting the Moraga Pear Festival. They contacted the school district and received permission to prune the trees that grew on district land. When the Smiths left town in 2003, their mission was taken over by MPF. "The result of the pruning has been phenomenal," says MPF President Chuck Treat, "trees have been producing more fruit each year and last year we gave a record 16,000