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## Saving the Pear Orchard

By Sophie Braccini



Bobbie Preston working in the trees Photo  
Sophie Braccini

Pear tree fans have an opportunity to help save a 101-year-old orchard this coming weekend, Oct. 25-26.

Kenny Murakami, owner of the Moraga Garden Center, says that this is the worst year he's ever seen for the destructive bacterial disease to which pear trees, and others, are vulnerable. Among the many customers asking him how to deal with the blight was Moraga resident Barbara Preston, who had to heavily prune her own fruit trees earlier this year - then she noticed that the old pear orchard at Canyon Road and Camino Pablo was also very much impacted. Preston set out on a crusade to save the trees.

"The first thing I did last spring was to contact the school district and ask them if they could do something," recalls Preston. The district hired a service provider but it was not entirely successful. "The most important part in taking care of the blight is to cut the attacked branches 8 to 10 inches into the safe part," says Murakami. The infection spreads under the bark, in the cambium of the tree. Limbs that are under attack show something that looks like scorching on the bark and leaves die; if left unchecked, the whole tree can die.

One of the questions regarding fire blight is whether or not sheers should be sterilized between cuts since it was once believed that the bacteria could be transmitted as people moved from one branch to the next. "It is a highly contagious bacteria," says Murakami. "Rain falling on blossoms can carry it down the tree, insects, bees can be vectors, even wind. But it has been demonstrated that pruning is not a serious risk."

Preston contacted Siamack Sioshansi of the Urban Farmers, and also the Moraga Park Foundation, where Karen Reed has been leading the care of the trees for years. Volunteers from both organizations will work in the orchard, cutting as many of the blight-ridden branches as possible.

Those who volunteer next weekend will receive instruction, and snacks provided by Whole Foods. Potential sites to be pruned include the orchards at Moraga Way and Canyon Road, Moraga Road at St. Mary's Road, Saint Monica Church, and the trail between the Moraga Commons Park and Fernwood Drive. An additional weekend will be added if needed. Helpers age 8 and up are welcome and should bring water, hats, gloves, sunscreen. Those who have pole pruners, hand pruners, orchard ladders, tarps, and garbage cans are encouraged to bring them. Volunteers should register in advance on the Urban Farmers website, [www.theurbanfarmers.org](http://www.theurbanfarmers.org).

Preston reports that after severe trimming, her trees are now coming back and show no more signs of infestation. The old pear orchard is on its way to a comparable recovery. Some say that with this kind of tree, the second century yields even better than the first.

### History of the Moraga Pear Orchard

The planting of pear trees in Moraga dates back more than 200 years and began with seedlings from pear trees planted by the padres at San Juan Bautista; they are now the oldest fruit trees in California. The pear orchard located at Canyon Road and Camino Pablo, next to Joaquin

Moraga Intermediate School, are Bartlett pears planted by James Irwin of the Moraga Company around 1913. The 101-year-old trees are still producing very nicely, thanks in large part to the efforts of the Moraga Park Foundation that, after years of neglect, took charge of trimming the trees every year and harvesting the fruit for donation to the food bank.

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