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Community gathers to clear fire blight from JM Orchard

Submitted by Bobbie Preston



From left: Sam Whipple, Ollie Wendt, and David Berkes, all of Boys Team Charity. Photos provided

town of Moraga; green bins to collect the debris were provided by Republic Services and Expert Tree Services chipped and hauled away the debris.

In the summer of 2014 Bobbie Preston noticed that the Pear Orchard next to Joaquin Moraga Middle School was heavily damaged by fire blight, a bacterial disease that affects pears, apples and members of the rose family. That August, 4,500 pounds of pears were gleaned by the Moraga Park Foundation for the Contra Costa/Solano Food Bank.

In the past, pruning of the JM orchard has been performed by the Moraga Parks Foundation, mainly aimed at architectural pruning and removal of dead wood; the first community pruning aimed at fire blight removal in the Orchard was in September of 2014. Since then, there have been eight community prunings of the orchard, and in 2016 interested Moragans funded the placement of organic fertilizer in the orchard to increase the vigor of the 93 remaining trees, and thereby increase their ability to fight the infection.

On Feb. 24 over 50 volunteers from Boys Team Charity, the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Joaquin Moraga and Camino Pablo students and parents, and members of Moraga Gardens Farm pruned out every bit of visible fire blight and cleared a large pile of landscape debris dumped illegally in the orchard. This event was sponsored by the Moraga School District, which owns the orchard, and the

The JM Orchard was part of the original DelMonte Pear Packing site and is over 100 years old; the pear has become the icon of Moraga and not only is on the Town Seal, it is the reason for the annual Moraga Pear Festival in September.

Fire blight is rapidly destructive and can kill a whole orchard in one season. The only feasible way to control fire blight in a large Orchard is by pruning out the infected wood; spraying must be done as each blossom opens, and since the blossoms don't open all on the same day, spraying would need to be repeated day after day until all blossoms have opened. Once an orchard is infected, the best one can hope for is control with vigilant pruning. Consultants at UC Davis have said that, with proper care, our 105-year-old pear trees could make it to 200.

There is extensive fire blight throughout Moraga and it is spread by bees, insects, birds, splashing rain, and wind, and movement of infected twigs and branches to the area of healthy trees. Check out your home trees and be aggressive pruning if you find fire blight (You must remove 8-12 inches of good wood below the infected wood to prevent recurrence; the infected areas can be identified by the blackened leaves, and the black, shriveled stems).

By August 2017 only small amounts of fire blight remained at the JM Orchard and the happy trees provided almost 8,000 pounds of pears to the food bank.

"It takes a village but our iconic pears look great ... here's hoping for 10,000 pounds of pears for the food bank this August," said Preston. "Watch the Town Newsletter for information about picking pears in August."

For more information, call Preston at (925) 376-8474.

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