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Sowing the seeds of hope, cooperation at Lafayette Community Garden

By Sharon K. Sobotta



Lafayette Community Garden co-founder Janet Thomas (second from right) with gardening team members Regina McGrath, Shirley Sigal, Jeanie Hill and Sue Scholtz. Photo Sharon K. Sobotta

flowers for the pollinators."

Sue Scholtz is a fifth generation Californian who has farmers from the Central Valley on both sides of her family. "I think it's in my blood to be out here watching plants grow," Scholtz says. As a member of the Wednesday watering team, Scholtz says she enjoys being out in nature on her own with the plants, keeping an eye on the real time effects of the drought. When asked where the drought is taking us, Scholtz is optimistic. "It's taking us to a good place today because it's raining out here," Scholtz says. "Today I'm hopeful."

Thomas says that kind of teamwork serves not only the plants and the wellness of the garden but also the wellness of the community itself. "The sense of community that is fostered here is something that we all benefit from and we certainly did during COVID."

The planning for the garden began in 2008 and the garden officially opened 11 seasons ago. Whether you're looking to get in the dirt and plant, breathe in fresh air, hang out with chickens, see cultural artifacts or learn how environmentalism and the garden connects to issues of social justice, take or leave a food donation in the pantry in front of the garden - which is located on Mr. Diablo Boulevard across from the reservoir - there promises to be something for you at the garden.

While giving a tour, Thomas shows off not just vegetable plants, but also elements inspired by cultures and countries around the world, a children's picnic area, a chicken coop and a nature trail behind the garden that leads to a handmade teepee. While walking, Thomas explains that neighbors in the area have provided artifacts leftover from the Miwok tribe, while acknowledging that we're walking on Miwok grounds. "We've learned that Lafayette was one of the densest populated Miwok areas in the whole country because of the climate and the richness of the ecosystem," Thomas explains while pointing out the Lafayette Creek. "Native Americans were (believed to be) here until the late 1700s when they were sent to the missions and by the early 1800s most of them were gone. We believe thousands were here."

While a formal land acknowledgment hasn't formally been executed, Thomas says that's something that'll be explored in the future with the input of a Tribe and a potential collaboration with schools. "We hope to work with public schools in the future to develop a curriculum. We want to be sure to include Miwok voices in that process."

Thomas also proudly shows off the more than 120 name tags that belong to 85 active families in the community who are members of the garden. "We like people to get to know each other while they're here," Thomas says. Memberships cost \$100 per individual per year and \$150 per family, however no one is turned away for inability to pay. "Anyone who is a working member of the garden can come and take produce at the end of a working day or they can come in anytime if they'd like peace and tranquility," Thomas says. "Or they can take home harvest that's in our harvest bin at any time."

Part of what prompted Thomas to help bring this garden to life in Lafayette was the magic she experienced while teaching environmental science at Acalanes High School. "It really brought me back to the earth. I

established an outdoor classroom right alongside Lafayette Creek. Lafayette is full of rich ecosystems," Thomas explains. "What I get is not just an amazing sense of community and groundedness but also the knowledge that I'm on a creek that's very much like it has been for hundreds of years here in Lafayette," Thomas says.

"Now more than ever, in our culture, at this moment in history, we need grounding to get us back to values that are important to nourish our souls, to nourish our planet, to remind ourselves of the natural rhythms that are so healing and so important," Thomas says. "One has a better enthusiasm about helping the environment if one has had exposure. One of our missions is to give that exposure to the community. We want this to be a place where people in the community can be reminded how important it is to live simply, to be attached to those (natural) things that are important."

For those who question how big of an impact a community garden has on creating a healthy planet or if it's worth the effort, Thomas says it absolutely is. "I think it's important for everyone to do what they can and maintain hope."

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