

Our Backyard

A NEWSLETTER ON THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN SAANICH



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Ready to DIG IT?

By Kayla Siefried, Compost Education Centre

The air is still a bit chilly as I write, but visions of snap peas and cherry tomatoes dance through my head. Before I get too ahead of myself though, it's actually time to care for the soil! Plants get vital nutrients and stability from soil, so to increase soil health, follow these tips:

1. Keep mulch on your garden year round

Mulching (with leaves or straw) protects soil from rain, wind, erosion and nutrient loss. It can suppress weeds and keep moisture in for longer. As the mulch decomposes, valuable organic matter is returned to the soil. In springtime, you can rake off your mulch for a couple of weeks so that your soil warms, compost can be incorporated, and your seeds can germinate. Then you can tuck your little plants back in.

2. Add compost

Lightly incorporate a 2-5cm layer of compost (preferably homemade) into the top layer of your soil. If you want to give your veggies an extra

boost, consider an OMRI-certified organic balanced fertilizer, and mix it in at the same time. Don't worry about digging it in too deeply as bugs will work it in for you. (You can also buy organic compost from garden centres.)

3. Disturb soil less

Disturbing the soil less helps it to retain healthy structure, reduce erosion, increase water-holding capacity, and allow soil creatures to do their thing! What's more is that this is easier for gardeners! Light raking rather than deep digging, covering soil in mulch, and leaving roots of spent plants to decompose in place are all LESS work.

So care for your soil first, and then plant your garden. With these practices in mind all year round, you're sure to notice a difference in the quality of your garden!

For more sustainability and gardening information, become a member of The Compost Education Centre or register for one of our online workshops.



May: Invasive Species Action Month

Ivy

Knotweed

By Carolyn Richman
Saanich Environmental Education Officer



Knotweed

The month of May might be one of the best times of the whole year to be out in our gardens. It's also time to think about some of the things we don't want in our gardens or communities: invasive plants. **In BC, the month of May is Invasive Species Action Month** and there are many ways to participate:

Learn more about invasive plants and what you can do on our website: www.saanich.ca/invasives

Are you interested in being a volunteer steward in Saanich Parks? Find out more: <https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/parks-recreation-community/parks/natural-areas/volunteer-for-pulling-together.html>

Knotweed is one of the top priority invasive plants in BC, causing damage to ecosystems and infrastructure. If you have a wide-leafed bamboo-like plant in your yard, please see our alert sheet to check for Knotweed: <https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Community/Documents/knotweed-alert-web.pdf>

Knotweed is very difficult to eradicate, requiring careful treatment. Saanich has a free Knotweed treatment program for this priority species. If you have questions or a possible Knotweed outbreak, please contact Environmental Services at planning@saanich.ca.

Dealing with invasive plants spreading from your yard to your neighbour's property is one way you can be a good neighbour. This booklet gives you information on some of the more wide-spread invasive plants such as English Ivy, Scotch Broom and Himalayan Blackberry that you can control on your property: <https://www.saanich.ca/assets/Community/Documents/Environment/Invasive%20Plants%20Booklet%202015%20web.pdf>

During Invasive Species Action Month, taking "action" to control invasive plants may also be great exercise and another opportunity to enjoy your yard this spring.

Thanks for doing your part!

PULLING TOGETHER

Volunteer Feature

Alf Birch *Pulling Together* Volunteer Program Lead Steward, Hutchison Park

By Katie Turner, Park Stewardship Coordinator, District of Saanich Parks

In the spirit of “in nature everything is connected”. Alf Birch, the *Pulling Together* Lead Steward at Feltham Park looks closely at the web of life. One of Alf’s favorite moments in the park was when he was enraptured by eagles and turkey vultures circling low in the sky, and after searching, discovered the deer carcass that held their interest. Encounters like these make local parks very special, fostering connections with the natural world.

Five years ago, Alf, his wife Robbi Birch, and neighbour John Block began ecological restoration at Feltham Park. This neighbourhood park, together with Bow and Brodick Parks, forms a network of green space that includes conifer forest, Garry Oak meadow, and wetland. In the beginning, Alf thought it was a “pretty park”, but after a closer look, he could see there was much “work to be done”. Since then this group, with help from community members and school groups, have cleared blackberry and ivy, and planted native plants. They target invasive plants that are threatening native vegetation, with a focus on maintaining natural habitat.

Another one of Alf’s goals at Feltham Park is to “build community connections and awareness”, and to motivate people to care and take “ownership of this place”. He has kindly offered to host local high school students, encouraging them to be more engaged by facilitating hands-on environmental stewardship. While standing with a group of students, Alf draws their attention to a tiny trickle of water. He asks, “where is the water going?” to inspire thinking and then explains the route of the trickle from here, past familiar locations like, the Root Cellar, Galey Farms, to Swan Lake, the Colquitz River and onto the Gorge Waterway. He then proceeds to connect this water to other life, “what other things live around water like this?”



Alf understands that humans are part of the ecosystem and that parks foster vital connections that go on to inspire action to protect our environment. Saanich is really fortunate to have volunteers like Alf who share their knowledge and enthusiasm for the parks that they care for.

To learn more about the *Pulling Together* Volunteer Program: <https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/parks-recreation-culture/parks/natural-areas/volunteer-for-pulling-together.html>

To learn about other ways to actively enhance our natural world in Saanich: <https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/parks-recreation-community/parks/natural-intelligence.html>

Growing Together

By Jillian Tuson
Natural Areas Practitioner, the District of Saanich Parks Division

In a time when climate change, conservation, and sustainability are common topics of conversation, Saanich Parks is finding ways to adapt our work practices to help protect our local ecosystems.

Protecting our urban forest canopy has been a key area of focus for the Saanich Parks Department as the pressures of a growing community increase. We strive to protect the canopy we have and to replace canopy that is lost. We utilize a large selection of both native and ornamental trees in our tree planting program to ensure that we create a diverse canopy that can withstand threats from plant diseases and insect pests, and to provide aesthetic appeal to our streets and parks. Native trees are particularly important in providing food and habitat for our birds, butterflies, and other native animals, and they are of course, perfectly suited to our climatic conditions.

When looking to purchase native plant material, provenance and sourcing is a matter for consideration. In the last two seasons Parks has obtained a number of our native trees from local operations that are growing stock from local seed source. Seed provenance can be critical in a plants ability to adapt to local conditions, and survive the effects of climate change in our region.

In recent years the numbers of available native trees from our wholesale nursery suppliers seem to be dwindling, so Parks is making a conscious effort to guarantee we have these native trees grown from Island stock available for future restoration projects and tree planting opportunities. For example, last year Saanich Parks staff collected and planted 100 Garry Oak acorns from local specimen oaks to begin growing our own stock of trees for future planting, and, this past year, we collected and planted an additional 250 local acorns. We also made donations to GOMPS (the Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society) and the Fanny Bay Salmonid Enhancement Society in exchange for more than 450 1-gallon Garry Oaks, Western Redcedars, Western Hemlocks, Douglas-firs and Grand Fir seedlings for future tree plantings.



DAVE LOCK

Left the Mountain Too Soon

Photo: Dave Lock (centre) celebrating the removal of invasive species on Mount Tolmie

By Amelita Kucher, Science Teacher - Mount Douglas Secondary

Saanich Parks' Pulling Together Program lost an environmental hero when Dave Lock, lead steward of Mount Tolmie Park, put down his loppers for the last time on November 3, 2019.

Dave volunteered at Mount Tolmie for more than 25 years. As the founder of the Mount Tolmie Conservancy Association he worked to preserve the at-risk Garry Oak ecosystem by removing a wide range of invasive species including Scotch Broom, which once covered the mountain and meadows. He was also involved in planting more than 2,300 Garry Oak seedlings and continuing efforts with local high school students on restoration projects. Dave worked as a physics educator in local schools but he truly shone when he engaged students of all ages on Mount Tolmie. Dave led everyone from preschoolers on wildflower discoveries to high school students removing invasive

species to university students who he mentored on their research projects. For example, in 2017 Dave hosted 30 invasive removal events and contributed more than 600 volunteer hours.

Dave was a lifelong learner who attended every workshop conference and training on Garry Oak ecosystems and led many field trips for experts in those fields on his mountain. Dave shared his incredible passion and energy for the park and could always connect with people of any age. He was humble, patient, and deeply compassionate with all the learners he worked with.

Dave left the mountain far too soon but his incredible contribution to preserving and maintaining this jewel of an ecosystem was recognized by being awarded the *Together in Action* Milestone Award from the Invasive Species Council of BC in 2020.

Saanich Parks Pays Tribute to an Extraordinary Volunteer

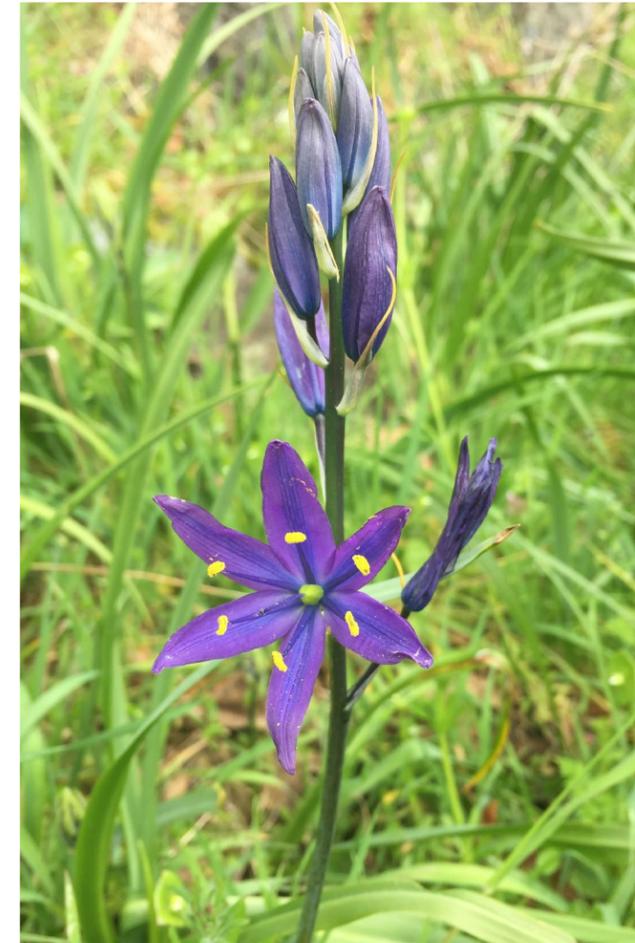
DAVE LOCK

By Katie Turner
Park Stewardship Coordinator, District of Saanich Parks

Dave Lock's incredible commitment to Mount Tolmie Park will never be forgotten. His legacy in the park will continue to inspire, not only Saanich staff, but community from the past, present, and future. Dave represents the incredible passion and talent that Saanich is so fortunate to have in our community, and we are thankful for the selfless time and energy he dedicated to parks and our environment.

Dave's environmental stewardship over the past two decades at Mount Tolmie Park, absolutely transformed the shallow soil, rocky outcrop Garry Oak ecosystem. Dave started off as volunteer for Saanich as a Garry Oak Restoration Project (GORP) volunteer that transitioned into the *Pulling Together* program. He spent thousands of hours removing invasive species such as Scotch Broom, English Ivy, and Daphne Laurel and he used careful strategies and meticulous planning and record keeping to ensure the numerous species at risk in the park were protected.

No one knew the park quite like Dave did, and he was ever welcoming and enthusiastic about sharing this special place with students and visitors. He inspired other volunteers to plant 100's of native trees, shrubs, and wildflowers, promoting biodiversity in this fragile environment. His ecological restoration legacy continues as local schools like Mount Douglas Secondary and St. Michael's University School have pledged to carry on Dave's legacy of care, with the help of other Saanich *Pulling Together* Volunteer Program volunteers.



The incredible abundance of the spring wildflowers in bloom today are nature's bouquet of appreciation!

A Legacy That Continues To Inspire: A Student Initiative On Mount Tolmie

By Ola Przydatek, Grade 12 student at Mount Douglas Secondary School

The Garry Oak ecosystem on Mount Tolmie is in trouble from being loved to death! Dave Lock and thousands of others over the past three decades removed many invasive species to reveal the beautiful Camas meadows we love. This threatened and diverse ecosystem must be protected for future generations, so students from Mount Douglas Secondary are taking action.

In past years we have worked on a number of restoration projects on Mount Tolmie. Our longest commitment has been participating in invasive species removals, which never really end! You may have noticed the fenced off area in the park: our first project was an experiment to determine the best way to restore the native ecosystems. We tried smothering and solarization to reduce weedy species, and then transplant treatments to enhance native biodiversity.



We then looked at the impact of mulching trays of Camas seed with Garry Oak leaves and the impact on germination. Mulch helped! In addition to this, we are also growing native plants in our new school garden to eventually plant back on the Mountain. It takes Camas five to seven years before it will bloom!

We are also working with Saanich Parks to explore options to limit the impacts of pedestrian traffic on the fragile meadow habitats. Our goal is to see if natural plant regeneration will occur if we discourage use of unofficial trails through the Camas meadows. We would like to monitor this over a period of time to evaluate the success of this project.



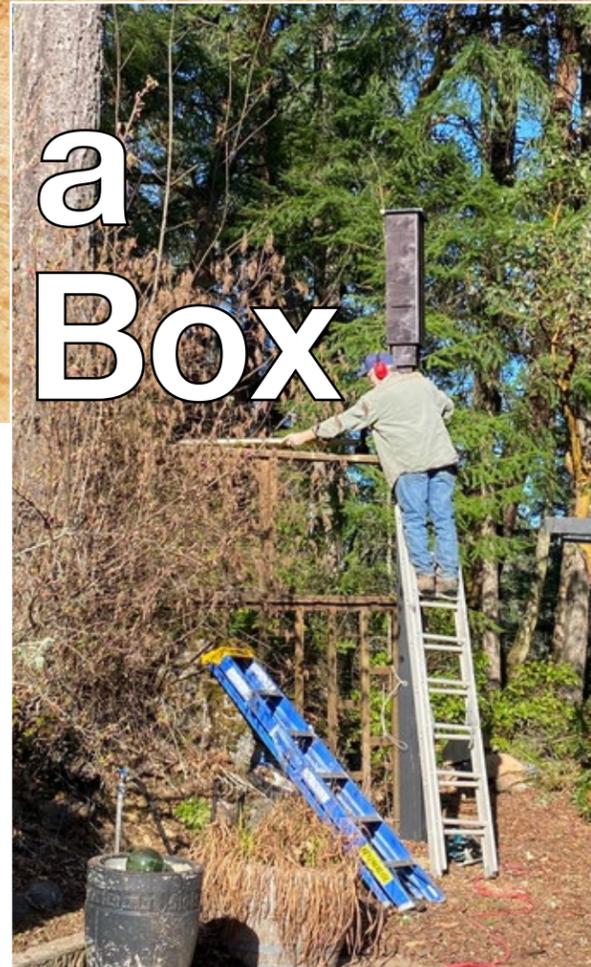
Building a Better Bat Box

By Winona Pugh, Friends of Tod Creek Watershed

Often overlooked and misunderstood, the bat populations in the Capital Region are threatened by habitat loss and human interference. Wetlands and wildlife trees, critical sources of food and shelter for bats, are disappearing with the urbanization of our landscapes and yet these small mammals are among the most beneficial animals for the health of our environment. Bats consume a variety of insects including an astonishing number of mosquitoes, providing natural pest control for agriculture and forests.

Inspired by completing a Lee Valley seminar, two members of the Friends of Todd Creek Watershed, Anne and Ian, offered to arrange a workshop to build bat boxes for interested members of the Friends of Tod Creek Watershed. An effective home for bats requires warmth, an opening at the bottom to provide a landing pad, and grooves inside for the bats to crawl and hang from. With plans downloaded from the internet, sections of plywood perfectly grooved and walls carefully prepared, we constructed two "Rocket" boxes and four "Maternity" boxes each designed for specific needs of the bat community that would inhabit them. Over a day and a half the boxes were screwed together to create three inner chambers, caulked to insure waterproof interiors and stained with a dark water based stain to absorb heat from the sun. The finishing touches, a metal roof, and the installation, were completed by our "Three Burley Guys", Ian, Michael, and Bernie.

Each of the boxes is now registered with Habitat Acquisition Trust to help with their study and monitoring of our Vancouver Island bat populations.



Spending Time at Home with the Four B's!

By Darren Copley, District of Saanich, Environmental Education Officer

Would you like to support nature in your garden or on your deck? Saanich's [Naturescape \(www.saanich.ca/naturescape\)](http://www.saanich.ca/naturescape) program offers many resources to help you enjoy attracting and supporting wildlife and biodiversity. By Naturescaping your yard, you help create habitat corridors that connect larger greenspaces such as nearby parks and protected areas, allowing wildlife more space. These wildlife corridors are important for maintaining biodiversity in the region.

Birds

Birds add colour, sound, and beauty to your yard and in turn they provide important pest control by eating and feeding their young on insects that might eat your plants. You can [grow plants](#) that provide nectar for hummingbirds and berries for other birds. Another way to attract birds is to provide them with places to nest, including installing nestboxes for those that would normally live in an abandoned woodpecker cavity. You can build these yourself using the instruction sheet that is available for [many bird species](#), or more specifically, the [nestbox for swallows](#) (and similar species) or these nestbox plans for [chickadees and nuthatches](#). Also check out this information about [protecting nestboxes from invasive birds](#).

Bats

Would you like to have even more natural insect control on your property? Supporting bats with a [bat roosting box](#) provides habitat for bats and supports the important roles they play in our local ecosystems. In BC, half of all bat species are of conservation concern and need local stewardship. Find out more about local bats at this link: [community bat programs of BC website: www.bcbats.ca/](http://www.bcbats.ca/).

Butterflies

As you enjoy the beautiful weather in your yard or on your patio, visits from butterflies can only add to that enjoyment! Find out how you can provide plants to [attract and support our native butterflies](#). You may want to identify your new visitors with this [Guide to Butterflies of South Vancouver Island](#) (and the Gulf Islands). While you are at it, you find out more about our [local dragonflies](#) as well.

Bees

Many Saanich residents are starting or increasing their food gardening this year. Many fruits and vegetables require pollination. This is also a great opportunity to provide habitat for native bees, which are important for the health of our ecosystems but also help pollinate your garden! Find out how you can provide [habitat for native bees](#) such as the beautiful and docile Blue Orchard Mason Bee (a highly efficient pollinator). Learn more about Blue Orchard Mason Bees on [e-fauna BC](#).

If you are reading this as a paper copy and would like to see the hidden links, please visit: Saanich.ca/ourbackyard to download the digital copy. While you're there, you might want to sign up to regularly receive it by email.

Environmental Services Working From Home

By Darren Copley, District of Saanich, Environmental Education Officer

Because of the declared state of emergency during the COVID 19 pandemic, I've been busy working from home. I am fortunate that much of my day-to-day work can be done remotely, since it often involves working digitally, but I haven't been alone - two folks, four indoor cats, 16 outdoor chickens, 256 wild birds (give or take a few) and approximately 65,536 insects...

We have been really lucky to have the space to indulge in our passion for nature by having naturescaped our own property, which when we began, was a weedy horse pasture. It has been a real treat to witness daily changes such as a new wildflower species blooming or another migratory bird returning from its winter "vacation" to raise young. An example everyone seems to love are the Rufous Hummingbirds, nectaring on our gorgeous Red-Flowering Currant flowers.

Another bright spot in all this is how amazing the weather has been, with long stretches of sunshine bringing out the butterflies. So far this spring I have spotted four species of native butterflies in our yard: Mourning Cloak, Satyr Anglewing, Western Spring Azure, and Sara Orangetip. The first two overwinter as adult butterflies - staying tucked under loose bark or a hole in a dead tree. The other two overwintered in an immature phase.

You can attract these beautiful butterflies if you have the plants the caterpillar needs to eat in your yard, on your deck, or in your neighbourhood. Some are pretty easy to have around, like Mourning Cloaks, whose caterpillars primarily eat willows (*Salix* spp.). The Ocean Spray feeding habits of the Western Spring Azure are not too difficult to accommodate either, since this is a gorgeous and fairly common shrub in the area. You would think the Sara Orangetip's preference for the mustard family (Brassicaceae) would be easy to oblige, but it especially likes Tower Mustard, which is not really much of a garden addition. And on that note, there are five species of butterflies in the region that all have caterpillars that like Stinging Nettle, including the Satyr Anglewing.

Stinging Nettles! If you need more convincing then Stinging Nettle is also really great for us: pesto, tea, etc., and a good compost enhancer as well.

I did see my first dragonfly recently - a California Darner in our veggie garden hunting for lunch. Also in the garden, several pregnant garter snakes have been sunning themselves conspicuously and hopefully gobbling up slugs. The three species we have here all give birth to live young, so soon there should be some young ones to keep an eye out for.

We have also been having some fun with a program called inaturalist <https://www.inaturalist.org/> - if you have a smart phone you can download the app and use it anywhere. If you take a picture of a wild thing (plant or animal) and ask it what you saw it gives a pretty good guess. It is really impressive with plants, birds, and mammals but not as good with insects and spiders, except butterflies and moths. So if you find a moth at your window or porch light you can give it a try. We are enjoying adding identified critters to it whenever possible to help make it smarter - it uses facial recognition software so is constantly improving. Also, if you don't know what it is, others can help you online. I'm learning too, of course - new plant species for example.

I recently submitted a red squirrel and then was curious about where else in the region people had seen them and was happy to discover that they are reported from Mount Douglas Park - also known as PKOLS. Another option is to put a location into the explore search - for instance I tried Mount Tolmie - WOW! Look at all the different reports from it! It is another way to get to know your neighbourhood. I should also mention that your photos can be pretty terrible, and it will still work - which helped convince me to give it a try!

If you want to see what we have seen in our yard and neighbourhood you can look at our specific observations by looking up my username "dccopley".

20th Anniversary! Saanich Environmental Awards

Do you know an organization or individual making a positive contribution to the natural environment in Saanich?

Deadline for nominations is
Tuesday, May 19th at 4 p.m.
saanich.ca/enviroawards

Award Categories

INDIVIDUAL	BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION
VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION	LONG-TERM ENVIRONMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT
BUSINESS	SUSTAINABILITY
YOUTH <i>(individual/youth group/school)</i>	



Piggy-back plant



Osprey



Tall Fringecup

GARRY OAK ECOSYSTEMS RECOVERY TEAM'S

15th Annual GOERT Conference postponed due to Covid-19

Visit GOERT'S website for News and Activities
(<http://www.goert.ca/activities/>) for up-to-date information

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Photo: A Naturescaped backyard full of native wildflowers that supports a diversity of wildlife.