

Snapshot: McWhorter helps bring Hamilton wetlands back to life

By Mark Prado, Marin IJ
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Botanist Christina McWhorter stands with her plants under grow lights at Hamilton Native Plant Nursery on Thursday, March 28, 2013, in Novato, Calif. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

CHRISTINA MCWHORTER is helping the old Hamilton Airfield, a 760-acre tract the military decommissioned in 1974, to return to its former natural habitat. The former airfield is slowly becoming a wetlands again. McWhorter, 35, manages the Hamilton Native Plant Nursery and grows toyon, California rose, coyote brush, mugwort, coast live oaks, buckeye and other vegetation that is planted in soil that now covers the old airstrip. That sand and soil was pulled from the bottom of the Port of Oakland and piped to Marin over the past few years. The work is being led by the state's Coastal Conservancy and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Q: How did you get into this line of work?



Botanist Christina McWhorter analyzes soil samples at Hamilton Native Plant Nursery on Thursday, March 28, 2013, in Novato, Calif. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

A: I was fortunate to realize that I was a "plant person" when I was in high school. Then, when I was earning my bachelor's in plant biology at UC Davis, I worked at the UC Davis Botanical Conservatory and fell in love with growing plants and teaching people about plants.

Q: What do you love about it?

A: I love that I can keep my hands dirty — directly working with soil, plants, water — and keep my mind engaged with carrying out new projects. There is always something more to learn. My line of work wouldn't be the same if it didn't also include engaging people in the world of plants.

Q: What's important about it?

A: Plants are all around us, supporting life on earth in many fundamental ways: food, medicine, shelter, oxygen, fiber, beauty, climate stability, etc. Through growing local native plants and restoring habitats, one can contribute to the health and stability of many other species, seen and unseen. This is one step towards repairing environmental damage.

Q: What has it taught you about yourself?

A: Working with plants and natural systems has taught me that I am not in control! I can best serve if I act as a facilitator, with plenty of patience and humility.



Christina McWhorter checks on some of her plants that are planted on what used to be a runway of the former Hamilton Air Force Base on Thursday, March 28, 2013, in Novato, Calif. She is a botanist at the Hamilton Native Plant Nursery. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

Q: What type of impact will it have on Hamilton in the long term?

A: The native plants being grown for the project will provide resilient and stable vegetation that will support wildlife and ecological processes in the site.

Q: What's hard about it?

A: Any time one works with natural systems, there is a certain level of uncertainty and lack of control. It is challenging to then prepare for all possible outcomes.

Q: What will be the plants' impact on wildlife?

A: The plants in the site will provide wildlife with critical habitat, including nesting material, shelter from predators, and sources of food.

Q: What will Hamilton look like in 50 years?

A: The wetlands site will continue to evolve into a mixture of tidal marsh, seasonal wetlands and upland habitats. One will see shallow areas underwater where shorebirds will flock and feed, flanked by areas of seasonal ponds and native trees and shrubs.

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