

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Growing Solutions Cultivates Sustainability

The Santa Barbara nonprofit takes a hands-on approach to improving the environment

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 01.12.2010

Perhaps because of the singular artery of Highway 101, we tend to think of Santa Barbara along an east-west, coastline orientation. But the natural direction of flow is north-south: a mountains-to-ocean, watershed orientation. So when Arroyo Burro Creek's ocean outlet was found to be the worst water quality in the county, officials looked upstream to find myriad sources — from horse manure from the [Earl Warren Showgrounds](#) to excessive runoff at [Adams Elementary School](#) and nitrates from the [Las Positas Public Golf Course](#).

That's when they called in [Growing Solutions](#), whose mission is “to build environmental and societal sustainability through hands-on education.”

The nonprofit organization, founded in 1999 by Don Hartley and Karen Flagg, designed bioswales — artificial wetlands to filter water. It has completed dozens of projects since, including sites at [SBCC](#), the county transfer station, Ellwood and [Santa Cruz Island](#). It's currently seeking funding for a solar classroom project at [Santa Barbara High](#), to build the next generation of solar installers and green building technologists.



Hartley and Flagg also teach at SBCC, passing on their expertise while mending the environment. Their ecological restoration and management class spent four days in November [planting on the cliffs of Santa Barbara Island](#).

Many of those active in restoration work around town got their start in a Hartley class: Ken Owen, executive director of [Channel Islands Restoration](#), who proclaimed himself a “reformed computer nerd” on the first day of class; John Warner, caretaker of the [Arroyo Hondo Preserve](#) and founder of [Santa Barbara Natives](#); Fray Crease of [Project Clean Water](#), and a host of landscape architects, nursery owners and city, county and federal public resource managers.

Santa Barbarans are fortunate that many of our public servants are highly knowledgeable about the health of the local ecology, which directly affects the health of its human population.

Teaching is still the primary mission for Hartner and Flagg. “There is no sense repairing the planet if there's no buy-in for long-term stewardship,” Hartley said.

Through a recent summer program, they worked with at-risk children to develop a sense of stewardship. “If you build something with your own hands, getting your hands dirty, you buy into it,” Hartley said.

A couple of years ago, Hartley and Flagg decided to grow Growing Solutions, purchasing a ranch in the foothills of Winchester Canyon to better explore the built as well as the natural environment. Less than a year after their purchase, the Gap Fire came roaring through. It burned their primary source of revenue for restoration projects — avocados — and discouraged social investors, some of whom pulled out after the ranch was charred.

True to their name in restoration, Growing Solutions has plunged ahead, broadening their work in sustainability efforts to composting toilets and biofuels with nonfood plants. They are investigating solid waste issues, determining which edible plants grow most sustainably in the local habitat.

“We want this as model for people to explore options that they can incorporate in their own lives,” Flagg said.

A year and a half after the Gap Fire, the ranch is a green tribute to Growing Solutions, bursting not only with new growth but the activity of “woofers” (willing workers on organic farms) dedicated to their work.

The Growing Solutions ranch has the ambiance of a peek into the past, but is oriented to a more sustainable future.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*