

When the plants hug you back: Volunteers maintain splendor of Golden Gate Park

Description

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Wayne Hiroshima and Bill Rafferty have dedicated 17 years to helping keep this Inner Sunset corner of Golden Gate Park in good shape. (Photo by Jan Robbins)

For Wayne Hiroshima and Bill Rafferty, working as assistant gardeners in Golden Gate Park around plants, animals and birds, places them regularly in the life cycle. They feel how plants, animals, birds and humans are interdependent.

â??Working on these gardens is like working on my house,â?• Rafferty said. â??When I garden, I feel like the area hugs me.â?•

Along the Lincoln Street side of the park, in the Inner Sunset, Hiroshima and Rafferty, both in their mid-60s, have given their time for a collective total of 17 years to sustain a healthy park environment.

â??The area on Fifth and Lincoln was overgrown and littered with discarded bottles and needles,â?• said Rafferty. â??People were afraid to walk in that entrance.â?•

Added Hiroshima: â??We are happy people can now walk in this area of the park, enjoying its beauty, using it as a picnic spot.â?•

Observant caretakers

Under the supervision of various San Francisco Recreation and Parks gardeners, the pair do everything from pulling weeds and planting grass to pruning and watering. Once familiar with their designated area, they become observant caretakers.

Rafferty noticed a crack in one of the bigger branches of a towering pine tree, and mushrooms growing 25 feet up, which indicated dead wood. â??We cut the tree down before it could fall and hurt someone,â?• Rafferty said.

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Both men got to know the birds of their areas â?? the hawks, ravens, the multitude of songbirds, like juncos and warblers, and of course, the ducks and geese in the lakes that everyone loves to feed. They noticed that the Great Horned Owl was not making a nest in its designated bird house, so they moved it further up the tree where the owl would feel safe.

Winter season presents a particularly fun time for Hiroshima and Rafferty â?? a great Charlie Brown Christmas story. â??We identify a tree â?? we pick the most pathetic one. We put up ornaments weâ??ve collected,â?• Rafferty said. â??Some disappear, some new ones appear. Itâ??s such a good feeling.â?•

Hiroshima began volunteering 10 years ago when his church encouraged congregants to give back to the community. â??I volunteer because I love the outdoors. Iâ??m proud of this city and its parks.â?•

Making tourists smile

Rafferty, his longtime friend, starting volunteering seven years ago. He also plays pickleball on the tennis courts not far from where he gardens.

Both men derive so much joy from their roles as assistant volunteer gardeners.

â??I love when tourists come by and smile when they see us working. I tell them where to walk to the Academy of Sciences. It makes me feel good to be helpful,â?• Hiroshima said.

As he swept his arm across the parkâ??s vista, Rafferty said, â??I have pride in what we do. Our neighbors come by and razz us (as one neighbor flew by on his bicycle), all in good fun.â?•

The benefits of volunteering have been documented by the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency established in 1993 that runs programs like Senior Corps. In its April 2007 review of research, the agency found that people who volunteer have greater functional ability and

lower rates of depression and mortality.

To inquire about volunteering as an assistant gardener with San Francisco Recreation and Parks, call 415-831-6330 or email recparkvolunteer@sfgov.org or go to their website at sfrecpark.org.

Contact Jan at jrobbins-seniorbeat@sfcommunityliving.org

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