



## Fifty Years of Sacramento Valley Chapter History

The California Native Plant Society (CNPS) was formed in August 1965. A few months later, G. Ledyard Stebbins, Dora Hunt, Tom Fuller, John Tucker, and Mary Ann Wohlers set a meeting for December 13, 1965 to establish a Sacramento Valley Chapter (SVC) of CNPS. More than 20 charter members gave their support to the chapter's formation. Although the chapter was organized at the end of 1965, the first monthly meetings began in 1966 and the true work of the chapter therefore began 50 years ago. Happy 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Sacramento Valley Chapter!

### 1960s: Founding and Fledgling Growth

**PROGRAMS and FIELD TRIPS:** In the early years, most of the SVC activity was the monthly program meetings (nine times a year) and field trips to view native plants. The earliest known program was in March 1966 where James Roof of the Regional Parks Botanic Garden in Berkeley presented "Adventures with California Native Plants." The first chapter field trip was in February 1966 and was led by Jack Major. The field trip, attended by around 60 members, was to view *Arctostaphylos myrtifolia* (lone Manzanita) in bloom in an area where CNPS was working to create a Reserve.

**SHARED WORK:** The chapter's work with other local environmental and horticultural organizations also began in these early years including Save the American River Association and the C. M. Goethe Arboretum Society (name changed to University Arboretum in 2005). In fact, SVC monthly meetings were held jointly with the C. M. Goethe Arboretum Society for about 20 years and the earliest native plant sales offered by the chapter were part of the Arboretum's annual celebration of Goethe's birthday.

**MEMBERSHIP:** In 1966, membership was \$6.00 a year and there were about 20 charter members. Slowly membership grew, but not fast enough to meet the mailing costs of the monthly newsletter. A financial crisis in 1968 led then newsletter editor Florence Marsh (chapter treasurer 1968-1991, secretary and newsletter editor 1968-1982) to ask members "to mail ten 6 cent postage stamps" to her if they wanted to continue receiving the mailings. Not long after this, the chapter suggested to CNPS that they follow the example of other organizations and return a portion of membership back to the local chapters. This early financial assistance (called subvention) probably saved the young SVC chapter and CNPS still sends a portion of membership fees back to the chapters today.

## **1970s: Reaching a Wider Audience**

**MEMBERSHIP:** In 1970 the chapter held its first membership drive with the motto “Each One Reach One.” All members received a folder of information and a membership application within their monthly newsletter and were asked to pass it along to a friend.

**EDUCATION and PLANT SALES:** The educational focus of the chapter became very strong in the 1970s, in part due to the work of active members Warren Marsh, Mike Weber, and Mike Baad. Marsh and Weber worked with Sacramento County schools to create nature areas and led field trips for teachers. Baad spearheaded a three-day California Native Plant Festival in March 1976, with a day of talks and exhibits held at the Shepard Garden and Arts Center. The chapter’s first plant sale independent of the G. M. Goethe Arboretum’s birthday celebration was held on the second day of the Festival. The plants sold at the sales during this time were propagated by the members, and the newsletter reminded readers in 1976: “on field trips watch for seed for propagating native plants for our...plant sale.”

**VERNAL POOLS:** With suburban development booming in the Sacramento area during this decade, the chapter first became involved in efforts to preserve our region’s vernal pools. In February 1974, Robert Caikoski attended the monthly meeting “to report on endangered vernal pools because of projected subdivisions at Phoenix airport and at intersection of Jackson Road and Excelsior, Sacramento County” (February 22, 1974). Newsletters at the end of the decade contain numerous updates and calls to attend meetings regarding vernal pools.

**FIELD TRIPS and PROGRAMS:** The chapter was extremely busy with field trips and towards the end of the decade began to document the plants seen on the trips in the following month’s newsletter. Also in the later 1970s, programs began to focus on conservation: “The Sacramento River: Its Problems and Efforts to Save Its Natural Resources” presented by Jim Burns in March 1978; and the drought: “Native Plants for Central Valley Gardens Without Irrigation” presented by Warren Roberts in March 1979.

## **1980s: Conservation**

**CONSERVATION COMMITTEE:** In 1981 a very active Conservation Committee was formed, led by Betty Matyas. Members were urged to get involved in letter writing campaigns, to attend meetings, and to actively work to protect our region’s native habitats as well as national and state wide environmental concerns. The vernal pools at Phoenix Field, the American River Parkway, proposed development of Bannon Island, and Del Paso Regional Park all received dedicated attention from SVC members. In 1982, the chapter received the Sacramento Audubon Society’s annual award for active conservation work.

HIBISCUS NEWSLETTER: In May of 1982, the Hibiscus became the chapter's flower and by November 1983, the monthly newsletter was titled *Hibiscus*. Chapter t-shirts emblazoned with a *Hibiscus californicus* (now called *Hibiscus lasiocarpus*) became available for purchase at monthly meetings and plant sales.

PLANT SALES: Plant sales became increasingly popular and profitable. For many years the sales were organized by Claudia Mefford and, as happens even today, a large number of additional volunteers. By 1985 the sales were large enough to need stock from nurseries and Cornflower Farms was one of the first nurseries to participate. Chapter members continued to grow and contribute native plants to the sales. During these years, the sales were held on the campus of California State University California.

### **1990s: Mature at 25**

25 YEARS OLD: In 1990 the chapter celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, along with CNPS. Betty Matyas (chapter president 1983-1984 and conservation committee chair beginning in 1981) wrote an informative two-page history of the chapter. All the work begun in the first decades continued with particular focus on conservation issues, annual plant sales, and field trips. The wide ranging work is represented in how many committees there were by the middle of the decade. In December 1966, CNPS president Stebbins had suggested that the chapter consider the following three committees: membership, publicity, and programs. By November 1995, the *Hibiscus* newsletter listed 18 committees:

- Plant Sale
- Conservation
- Programs
- Rare Plants
- Plant Watch
- Membership/  
Wildflower Seeds
- Habitat Enhancement
- Field Trips
- Book Sales/ Historian
- Natural Communities
- Newsletter
- Public Outreach  
Coordinator
- Environmental Council  
of Sacramento
- Membership
- Hospitality
- Fairs and Events
- Education
- Posters

PRESERVATION and CONSERVATION: Preserving native habitat is at the core of the chapter's long history. During the 1990s vernal pools continued to be a primary focus, and chapter work in this area was spearheaded by Eva Butler and Carol Witham. In 1996 the chapter co-sponsored a conference with the state CNPS and the Wildlife Society titled "Ecology, Conservation and Management of Vernal Pool Ecosystems." In addition to vernal pools and the American River Parkway, the chapter members commented on environmental documents, appeared at hearings related to proposed revisions to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), became involved with Habitat 2020, and were involved in numerous other conservation and land use issues.

**GARDENS:** In early 1991, the chapter was asked by the San Juan Suburban Water District to assist in planning a California Native Plant demonstration garden. A few years later, in 1996, interested members met under the guidance of Eva Butler, then the Sacramento Valley chapter president, to consider a Native Plant project for the Sacramento Old City Cemetery. Sabrina Okamura-Johnson and Cassandra Nguyen Musto, as joint garden coordinators, continued to develop a planting plan and started fundraising, transplanting, seeding, and tending to the new garden. Nguyen Musto continues to volunteer many hours in the California Native Plant Demonstration Garden guiding the work of volunteers and Sacramento County Sheriff's work crews.

Towards the end of the decade, the Chapter began working with schools to establish California Native Plant gardens on their campuses. Jennifer Hogan still coordinates Kids In Native Gardens today.

**ESCAPED EXOTICS:** The chapter's work in removing exotics from the American River parkway began in 1991. Jack Hiehle started to hold work days at Effie Yeaw which included acorn planting and exotics removal. Other efforts to remove exotics along the American River Parkway also gained footing during the 1990s, including grant funding applied for by Eva Butler. Eventually the volunteers removing escaped exotics officially became the "Weed Warriors" and work days are organized by Frank Wallace.

**NEW WAYS OF REACHING OUT:** In 1997, Carol Witham (long time active member at both the chapter and state level) created the chapter's very first website. In 1998 the chapter set up a Wildflower Hotline which provided callers with information on chapter field trips and activities. Appropriately, the phone number was 916-447-WILD and was in place for a few years.

**SUBCHAPTERS and NEW CHAPTERS:** Growth of overall membership in CNPS led to the creation of both the Redbud chapter (western Nevada and Placer counties) and the Stockton sub-chapter in 1991. Originally part of the San Joaquin Chapter, the Stockton sub-chapter joined the Sacramento Valley Chapter in 1993. Longtime sub-chapter coordinator Martha Mallery has involved members (mostly from Stockton and Lodi) in field trips and talks, as well as restoration and preservation work at the Oak Grove Regional Park. In 2012 Mallery was honored by the Oak Grove Regional Park docents when they named the native plant garden after her.

### **2000s-2016: Horticulture and Volunteerism**

**ELDERBERRY FARMS:** The idea for a chapter nursery had been growing for years and by 2005 Chris Lewis and a small band of enthusiasts began planning and researching. Two years later, Elderberry Farms Native Plant Nursery was established at Soil Born Farms. With much fundraising and volunteer labor, the nursery built a green house, gravel pathways, and propagated many plants from our region that had not been previously grown in this county. Betsy Weiland planted numerous

demonstration gardens around the nursery. Robin Rietz joined in 2009 and has been overseeing propagation ever since. Recently the nursery has made additional improvements to prevent threats from plant pathogen *Phytophthora*. In the decades before the nursery existed, chapter members would contribute native plants to the annual plant sales. Since the nursery began, there are no longer annual appeals in the *Hibiscus* asking for members to contribute plants to the sales.

**GARDENS GONE NATIVE TOURS:** The Gardens Gone Native tours began in 2011 and had a slightly bumpy start when the original committee chair had to step down. Dennis Dahlin and Maria Kochis volunteered to co-chair and the first tour was held on May 1, 2011 as planned. The tour has been steadily increasing in number of host gardens and number of visitors ever since, with over 1,000 people registering for the tour in 2015.

**VERNAL POOLS:** Eva Butler and Carol Witham continued to lead the chapter's efforts in the area of vernal pools preservation. The first Vernal Pools Celebration fundraiser was organized in 2006 by Witham. Field trips and educational outreach related to the vernal pools at Mather had long been a chapter project under the guidance of Butler, but in 2011 the work was taken on by a new organization called Splash (also under Butler's leadership). A number of successful litigation efforts during these years have protected vernal pools at Mather.

**VOLUNTEER MEMBERSHIP:** While membership has reached around 700, the core work of the chapter has been held by a much smaller number of dedicated members. With all the conservation concerns in the area that need addressing, there was a worry that the most active chapter members would reach "burn out." As a result, the chapter worked hard in the early 2000s to create a paid position to act as the chapter's conservation point person. It was hoped that such a person would be able to review Environmental Impact Reports, attend planning meetings, and be a voice for the chapter in all related areas for the conservation of native plants in the Central Valley.

The Sacramento Valley Chapter of CNPS is an organization run by volunteers, and as a result, the activity and focus of the chapter reflects the skills and interests of its members over time. Please consider adding your skills and interests to the chapter's work in increasing understanding and appreciation of California's native plants.

--Stasia Griffin September 2016