

# ***Why I Love Being a Botanic Garden Docent***



Students learning about flower parts on a pollination tour led by docent Maggie Ingalls

One of the joys of my life is leading tours for children at the Regional Parks Botanic Garden. This is a pleasure on many levels. The garden itself is such a wonderful garden for children, since it is a garden full of small-scale wonders. It is a wild garden, full of hidden glades, crooked paths leading to mysteriously unseen destinations, a gurgling stream with many bridges, and a forest with majestic trees casting deep cool shade on hot days. I wish we didn't have to tell the children to "just walk, don't run," because this garden is crying out for a game of hide and seek or capture the flag, or for some imaginary game of heroes and villains.

And children respond to this garden. They love it! Some of them love the beauty that is here, some love the wildlife that abounds, some just love being outside. One delightful aspect of leading tours for children is that they see the world from a different perspective, and you can see through their eyes if you listen to them. They are looking at the details, and they are seeing a level that adults miss. "Look, there is a ladybug wing in this bird poop!"

I think one of my most successful moments as a docent was when my group came across two lizards having a battle! We trailed those lizards for at least five minutes. I have had children thank me, and not just at the end when the teacher tells them to. In one group of five boys, I overheard, "You were right Eddie, this is the coolest field trip ever!" Eddie was obviously interested in plants, and the other boy wasn't particularly, but he too was enchanted with our garden.



Pollination tour for elementary school students

When I am leading a tour for children, I try to remember that we have an underlying purpose. Whatever the tour topic—pollination, Indian uses of native plants, plant adaptations to habitat—our real mission is to engage the children with the natural world, to spark a love of nature and nature's processes. My big dream is to contribute to the development of a biologist, botanist, or ecologist. But if all I do is encourage a fascination with and love of nature in some of these children, I will have made an important positive difference in the world.

On a more personal level, I love being a docent in the garden because it gives me a good reason to go there often. I love wandering around this beautiful space. I love talking about plants and looking at plants and introducing people to my favorite plants! I get great pleasure from following the seasons, and this is such a wonderfully rich and diverse garden in which to do so. There truly is always something blooming in the garden, and I also enjoy the seed heads and the changing colors of the subtle California seasons.

The garden connects me to the natural landscapes of California. I am an avid hiker with a passion for wildflowers, so I get very excited when I recognize a plant in the wild. Seeing a plant in the garden, where there is a label (or a gardener to ask), is much more helpful than looking at a photo on Calflora. In addition, I learn the plants in all their phases, from bloom to seed. So sometimes I can look at an old flower stalk and at least know what genus I am looking at. It is very satisfying to know a plant both in its beauty and in its dishabille.

I had been gardening for 25 years when I took the course to be a docent at the Regional Parks Botanic Garden. I was already interested in native plants and plant conservation, having gotten involved in these issues while living in the Chicago suburbs. When I moved to California, I looked around for a way to learn about California's native flora. I googled "native plants" and found the perfect place—the Regional Parks Botanic Garden. I started off in 2008 helping with propagation for the plant sale, and signed up for the next docent course, which started that fall. The docent course is mostly taught by Dr. Glenn Keator, who is a font of plant knowledge.

You won't be surprised to learn that I am a plant nerd, and I love plant names, common and scientific. Plus I had a fair amount of knowledge about plants and gardening already. Now I had one morning every week where all I did was learn about and discuss plants with other people whose eyes didn't glaze over at the mention of plant names. So I was in heaven for the six-month course!



Gathering bulbs to be used for soaproot brushes in a docent enrichment class

However, most visitors aren't very interested in the scientific names of plants. So please don't let the idea of all those Latin names keep you from becoming a docent. It is more important to learn the stories that go with the plants, stories about pollination, how the Indians have used the plants and cared for the landscape, where each plant grows and how it survives there. For example, most manzanitas only grow in California, but bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*) grows all around the northern hemisphere, plus on the tops of two volcanos in Central America. Just stop and think about that—how did that happen?! Or the story of the yucca and the moths that pollinate it. Yucca moths and the various species of yucca plants are highly dependent on each other, and that is a fascinating story.



Spring tour

One of the benefits of being an active docent in the garden is the opportunity to go on docent enrichment field trips. Through the docent enrichments, I have been to a bee garden in Berkeley, I have looked at rare wildflowers on Walker Ridge, and I have toured the fire area on Mount Diablo looking for the special plants that appear the year after a fire.

I am very glad that I took the docent course at the Regional Parks Botanic Garden. I am very proud to be supporting this beautiful place and the important work that is done here. And I love being a docent!

—Maggie Ingalls