Caring For Your Creek

A healthy creek on your property is a gift to your family and your community. Besides a quiet, contemplative space for you to relax, a creek with native plants on its banks attracts desirable wildlife and protects your property from erosion. It also enhances stormwater management, water quality, and wildlife habitat downstream from your property. With a creek on your property, you have an opportunity to make a difference for the people around you, as well as the environment.

A creek tells us a lot about the community it flows through. Keeping it healthy is a shared project. Don’t be afraid to gather your neighbors to address a stream issue. Coordinating with others and seeking help from experts and agencies will help to address issues outside of your control and direct technical expertise to the areas that need help.

The county guidelines for private creek maintenance can be found at www.contra-cost.ca.us/5754/Private-Creeks.

For additional ideas on native plants and other projects that will enhance your creek and contribute to your community, visit http://thewatershedproject.org/our-programs/greening-urban-watersheds/.

Protecting Your Creek

Your creek provides many benefits to you and your community. Understanding how to care for your creek is crucial to maintaining and improving the health and value of your property, your community, and Contra Costa County.

Typically homeowners own up to the center of the creek and not just to the fence line. These privately owned creeks are an important part of our county’s drainage system.

Through proper care of your creek, its creek banks and creek-side vegetation, you will:

- Enhance your property
- Prevent erosion and flooding
- Preserve water quality
- Enhance fish and wildlife habitat

All kinds of creeks can be found in the County, from natural to channelized.
Living with Your Creek

If your property has a creek or a waterway flowing through or abutting it, it is your responsibility to maintain it.

Proper creek care includes:

- Removing blockages that could cause flooding.
- Keeping banks vegetated to prevent erosion.
- Preventing pollutants from entering waterways.
- Removing trash to help maintain a healthy watershed.

As a property owner, you are responsible for any damages to waterways that result from neglect or unpermitted activities. You are also responsible for the actions of your gardeners, landscapers, maintenance workers and contractors.

It is against the law to block drainages within the County and illegal to cause discharges of pollutants to the storm drain system, including our creeks and waterways.

6 Things to Keep Out of Creeks

Soil (from bare and eroded banks or disrupted soil) results in suspended sediment and loss of habitat and capacity.

Chemicals (from oils, gasoline, cement, soaps, paints, pesticides, herbicides, and chlorinated water) severely alter water quality and threaten aquatic life.

Nutrients (from fertilizers, animal waste, and failed septic systems) cause algae blooms and stagnant water which lowers dissolved oxygen levels, killing aquatic life.

Bacteria (from animal waste and failed septic systems) make waterways toxic for all forms of life and for recreational activities.

Trash and debris (from illegal dumping, dispersed litter) causes storm drain blockage, drainage problems, poor water quality, and wildlife impairment; acts as a magnet for more waste, resulting in aesthetic issues and decreased property values.

Green waste, mulch (from landscaping and yard maintenance) compacts riparian (creekside) soil, restricts native plant growth, and depletes the oxygen available for aquatic life.

6 Ways to Keep Creeks Healthy

Maintain at least a 10 foot buffer from the top of creek banks. Keep the buffer area clear of liquids, chemicals, vehicles, and debris.

Trim back tree limbs 2 feet above the top of the bank and remove low lying branches while retaining the canopy near the creek.

Keep your creek banks vegetated with low groundcover to minimize soil erosion. Plant native plants appropriate for your creek banks.

Prevent invasive plants like ivy, vinca, arundo or blackberry from being established along creek banks.

Prevent contaminants from entering the water by limiting fertilizer and pesticide use. Avoid routine perimeter spraying for ant control; use integrated pest management (IPM) practices. See http://ipm.ucanr.edu

Minimize impervious surfaces so that stormwater is allowed to soak into the ground rather than run off directly into waterways or storm drains.

6 Things NOT to do to Creeks

The following activities can cause flooding and are PROHIBITED without a Drainage/Flood Control permit:

Never install or build structures near a waterway without first contacting the County’s Application and Permit Center to find out if you need a permit.

Don’t allow any obstruction in a natural creek, man-made (improved) channel, or storm drain.

Never deposit or dump any material (including yard waste) on a creek bank or in a creek or channel.

Don’t excavate, grade, or alter a channel, or reduce the holding capacity of any waterway.

Avoid destroying or significantly altering riparian or bank-stabilizing vegetation (including cutting, clearing, burning, and removing) except as necessary to maintain the creek’s water flow capacity.

Do not plant any shrub, vine or tree within a riparian corridor without a written permit.
Creek Permits and Resources

**Contra Costa County Permits**

Please call (925) 674-7744 to inquire about your specific project before beginning any work in or near a creek. You may also contact the Public Works Department, Flood Control Division at (925) 313-2000. Visit the Application & Permit Center at http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/4474/Application-and-Permit-Center.

Contra Costa County requires you to obtain a Drainage/Flood Control permit if you plan to modify the flow of water, or work in, or build near, a creek or channel in the unincorporated areas of the County.

**Contra Costa County Ordinance Code**

Visit https://library.municode.com/ca/contra_costa_county. See Title 10, Section 1010 for Drainage; Section 1014 for Stormwater Management and Control; and Section 914.14 for Creek Structure Setback requirements.

**Streamside Management Program for Landowners (SMPL)**

This program, from the CA Urban Streams Partnership (CUSP), offers guidance to creekside property owners about creek maintenance issues for each individual situation. Contact SMPL at (510) 932-2370 or atcustreams@gmail.com.

**Public Works Maintenance**

Call (925) 313-7000 to report trees that have fallen into waterways and erosion/bank failures on publicly maintained property.

**County Watershed Program**

Visit http://www.co.contra-costa.ca.us/344/County-Watershed-Program for more information about your creek.

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**Creek Permits and Resources**

**Healthy Creeks**

- Upper bank stabilized with native plants
- Flood line of creek
- Lower bank stabilized with native plants
- Terrace kept clear of materials and structures. Native vegetation planted for habitat
- Normal stream flow line. Stream channel free of obstructions

**Creeks in Trouble**

With hundreds of miles of creeks in our County, even seemingly minor incidents can have significant impacts on the health of our waterways. Besides being unsightly, illegal dumping, discharges, and spills of chemicals, soaps, trash, debris and other materials pollute our creeks, harm our wildlife, and can impede natural water flows.

Call 1-800-No-Dumping (1-800-663-8674) to report illegal dumping.
Recommended Plantings

Caring for a creek means taking action to increase the diversity of plants and wildlife, protect the creek’s natural flow, and stabilize the banks. Focusing on native plants to improve habitat for native wildlife has the added benefit of preventing erosion. Using the right plants in the right locations also helps the natural flow remain unimpeded.

**Top of Terrace**

Consider the top of the creek terrace, from the edge of the creek banks and away from the creek, a “buffer zone” that protects your creek and provides opportunities to attract water-loving species.

- California Sycamore
- Oaks
- Big Leaf Maple
- California Buckeye
- Toyon
- Coyote Bush
- Wild Rose
- Spice Bush

**Upper Bank**

Mid-bank to the top of the bank.

- Willows
- Alders
- Dogwood
- Ninebark
- Native Blackberry

**Lower Bank**

Edge of the active channel, from the toe of the slop to mid-bank.

- Willows
- Alders
- Dogwood

- Removing vegetation and/or placing hard structures on stream banks will invite erosion.
- Bamboo, English ivy, pampass grass, hypericum, Scotch and French broom are all examples of non-native species that become too aggressive and kill better functioning native species.

**Groundcover**

Several native groundcover plants are great options to minimize soil erosion, protect the creek banks, and replace invasive species. These species include, but are not limited to:

- **Red fescue** *(Festuca rubra)*
- **Meadow Barley** *(Hordeum brachyantherum)*
- **California aster** *(Symphyotrichum chilense)*

Toyon *(Heteromeles arbutifolia)* is a favorite of berry-eating birds.

Many migratory birds, like this cedar waxwing *(Bombycilla cedrorum)*, seek out creeks in our area that support native plants and berries. Waxwings are attracted to running water, and love to bathe in and drink from shallow creeks.