

American Penstemon Society Grant Expands the Alhambra Native Plant Trail

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Friends of Alhambra Creek, Martinez, California

Friends of Alhambra Creek (FoAC) is a local volunteer organization located in Martinez, California. The group was established in 1991. FoAC has promoted local creek projects and habitat enhancement since its inception. One of FoAC's notable projects, the Alhambra Native Plant Trail, is a series of California native plant gardens on public and private lands throughout Martinez. This project takes a dedicated group of volunteers, affectionately referred to as "The Trail Team" to plant and maintain the native plant gardens. The idea for the Alhambra Native Plant Trail came about after the John Muir National Historic Site (JMNHS) had a native garden installed near its Visitor Center in 2007/08. Volunteers who worked in the garden thought it would be a good idea to plant more native gardens throughout Martinez to promote our local native flora and create habitat for our local native fauna. Our first garden on the Alhambra Native Plant Trail was installed in 2010 at the Martinez Amtrak Station. Since then, the Trail has blossomed into 18 gardens located between the Amtrak Station garden and the JMNHS Visitor Center garden.

In 2020, FoAC applied for a \$500 American Penstemon Society grant to promote the use of native penstemon in our native habitat gardens. There was a sparsely planted bed at the JMNHS that was perfect for a penstemon garden. Adding a separate bed of penstemon would not only expand the existing native garden, but it would also have the benefit of being highly visible. Anyone who enters the JMNHS grounds from the parking lot or the Visitor Center will see the penstemon bed. The JMNHS is visited by approximately 50,000 people a year! In addition to the penstemon, there are a few native grasses planted to compliment the foliage. Our penstemon selections were made with the intention of

providing wildlife habitat and nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies. We also took into consideration the fact that California is one of just a few locations in the world to have a Mediterranean climate.

When FoAC was awarded the American Penstemon Society grant, we contracted with The Watershed Nursery in Richmond, CA and Native Here Nursery in Berkeley, CA to propagate four types of penstemon that are native to our area.

- *P. heterophyllus* (foothill beardtongue)
- *P. centranthifolius* (scarlet bugler)
- *P. heterophyllus* ssp. *purdyi* (Purdy's penstemon)
- *P. heterophyllus* var. *heterophyllus* (bunchleaf penstemon)

The plants were grown from locally collected seeds.

Penstemon heterophyllus (foothill beardtongue) is an herbaceous perennial that spreads to 2' wide. The 1" to 1.5" blue tubular flowers densely cover the 20" spikes. This penstemon is endemic to California and is found in all the major coastal mountain ranges and the northern Sierra Nevada foothills. It is adapted to poor, dry, well-drained soil. Once established, it requires no summer water. These traits make it an excellent choice for rock gardens. Native Americans used penstemon roots to relieve toothaches.

Penstemon centranthifolius (scarlet bugler) is an upright perennial that is summer deciduous and grows from 2' to 4' tall and about 1' wide. It is native to northern, southern, and central California. Long red flowers appear in the spring and continue to bloom throughout summer. Hummingbirds are attracted to the red flowers and nectar. *P. centranthifolius* prefers well-draining soil but can tolerate clay soil and poor drainage. It can provide vibrant color in rock gardens and along pathways.

Penstemon heterophyllus var. *heterophyllus* (bunchleaf penstemon) is a perennial that is 8" to over 3' and blooms spring through early summer. Found in open rocky places near chaparral, this penstemon needs good drainage and rocky soils. Once established, it needs little to no water in summer.

Penstemon heterophyllus var. *purdyi*, (Purdy's penstemon) is a perennial that grows up to 2' tall and blooms spring through early

summer. It is found in open rocky places near chaparral, openings in oak woodlands, and grasslands. Purdy's foothill penstemon needs good drainage and rocky soils and little to no water in summer once established.

Propagation of the penstemon plants began in May 2020. We ordered one-gallon size plants.



Top: Penstemons growing in one-gallon size pots at The Watershed Nursery. Bottom: A volunteer tending the penstemons at Native Here Nursery; picking up the penstemons from The Watershed Nursery on January 2, 2021.

California has been suffering from drought for a long time. So, naturally, we wanted to plant with the rain to give the new plants a healthy start. Rain was in Martinez's weather forecast in early January, so, wanting to take advantage of the rain and get the plants in the ground, we planned a date for FoAC volunteers and

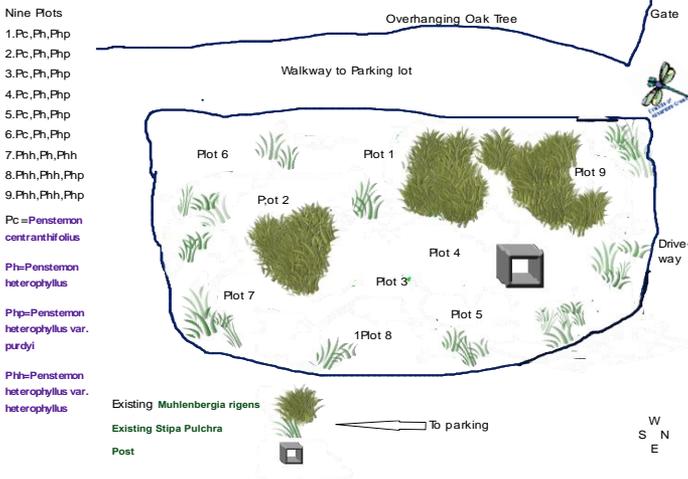
partners to plant the penstemons. Sadly, due to COVID-19 restrictions, the JMNHS was closed to the public, and our volunteers were not allowed on the grounds to plant. Thankfully, National Park Service Ranger Keith Park understood the necessity of getting the plants in the ground and volunteered to plant them for us.

As it turns out, it was lucky Ranger Park was doing the planting because he found evidence of a critter near the new plantings. Ranger Park is an expert gopher catcher, and he set a trap. He has created his own design by setting two traps, one in each direction of the gopher tunnel, and staking them down so the gopher doesn't take the trap with it.

The penstemon plants have been in the ground since January 8, 2021, and we have been lucky to get some rain. Our plan is to monitor their progress and water the plants as necessary until they are established.

The JMNHS Visitor Center is in the background of the photo below, and the entrance to the grounds is the gate on the left. The parking lot is to the right and behind the bed shown in the photo. It will be hard for visitors to miss the beautiful flowering penstemon in this location. Another location where we planted some penstemon is on Alhambra Ave., one of our main thoroughfares in Martinez.

Many of the FoAC members ordered their own penstemon plants to plant in their own gardens. We plan to educate people about our native penstemons, as well as complete an informal study of how the penstemons fare in our chosen planting locations.



Top: Ranger Keith Park with the penstemon plants just prior to planting. Middle: Ranger Park planting the penstemons at the JMNHS. Bottom: Planting plan for the penstemon bed at JMNHS.





Opposite Top: The new penstemon bed at the JMNHS. Top: Evan Levy with the Contra Costa Resource Conservation District (CCRCD) planting at the corner of Alhambra Ave. and E St. Alhambra High School is right next door. Opposite Bottom: Evan and Daniel Correa of the CCRCD planting penstemons.





P. centranthifolius



P. heterophyllus



P. heterophyllus ssp. purdyi



Local artist Dorrie Langley, with the Martinez Arts Association, created a sign to express our gratitude to the American Penstemon Society. The sign will be installed at the JMNHS Penstemon Garden. We hope to do a follow-up article when the plants are in bloom.

We could not have done this project without the help of our community partners and the generous grant from the American Penstemon Society.

Friends of Alhambra Creek would like to thank:
California Native Plant Society, East Bay Chapter

ebcnps.org

Contra Costa Resource Conservation District

ccrcd.org

EcoMulch

ecomulch.org

Martinez Arts Association

www.martinezarts.org

National Park Service at the John Muir National Historic Site

www.nps.gov/jomu/index.htm

Native Here Nursery

nativeherenursery.org

The Watershed Nursery

watershednursery.com