

Connecting with Nature on Fiscalini Ranch Preserve: Weeding on the Ranch



By KITTY CONNOLLY, Executive Director, Friends of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve (fiscaliniranchpreserve.org)

For those with an eye for native plants, weeds really stand out. What to some appear only as beautiful flowers are viewed by others as an imminent threat of alien domination. Many Ranch walkers have come to recognize invasive species and are alarmed by their presence. At Friends of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve, we share your concern. Here are some of the actions we are taking to keep weeds under control.

CCSD and FFRP monitor invasives on an ongoing basis and coordinate our limited resources to achieve as much progress as we can. We have developed a strategy that concentrates on protecting and maintaining areas that have been worked on in the past and expanding them each year. As you know, this year has had the added challenges of the late rains aiding explosive growth of weeds and the hiatus during the Covid-19 shutdown.

To see our strategy in action, let's take the area long the Marine Terrace Trail (fire road) as an example. FFRP volunteers spent three workdays prior to the lockdown and the last two Wednesdays with crews of 15 working in that area. This work is done by hand and, when necessary, involves carrying out maturing flower heads to prevent the spread of more seeds.



Black mustard, *Brassica nigra*



Italian thistle, *Carduus pycnocephalus* ssp. *pycnocephalus*

Given the huge number of Italian thistle on the Ranch this year, there are bound to be some that were missed or that have grown since the last work party. That is always a challenge.

Mowing is used to control large patches of weeds. In the days after the cattle were removed from the preserve, the mustard and thistle were head high across large areas of the Marine Terrace. Mowing reduced the population of weeds to the point where native plants began to recover and maintenance with hand removal was possible. Parts of the East Ranch still require mowing at least annually or they would be overrun.

While everyone who volunteers with the various weeding projects would like to see the Ranch cleared of all noxious weeds, the reality is that this will always be a slow slog. CCSD and FFRP together have made a lot of progress over the last 15 years, but it's not going to end soon and it's going to take a lot of hands-on effort.

If weeds are a special concern of yours, please volunteer with our Wednesday Weeders. Nothing replaces hands-on weeding!

To volunteer, visit fiscaliniranchpreserve.org or write to volunteer at ffrpcambria.org.