After saving Tilden Park’s native botanic garden, a group of plant experts, gardeners, and nature lovers continued their commitment by establishing the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) in 1965. Taking the lead as founding chapter of the statewide organization, the East Bay Chapter of the California Native Plant Society (EBCNPS) identifies locally rare and unusual plants, advocates protection of botanical priority areas, collaborates in preservation and restoration of habitats, provides sustainably propagated native plants, and shares science-based information about caring for the botanical treasures of Contra Costa and Alameda counties. Free monthly program meetings are open to the public.

Knowing what’s growing is essential for developing strategies to sustain California’s extraordinary biodiversity. “Overall, the mixture of vegetation types in California is extremely rich; the state boasts some 5,000 native plant species, about a third of the national total and the highest number found in any state,” writes Peter Raven in *Beauty and the Beast: California Wildflowers and Climate Change*. “Even more remarkable is the fact that more than half of California’s species are found exclusively in or near the state, and nowhere else on Earth!” With habitats as dissimilar as the San Francisco Bay shoreline and Mount Diablo’s slopes, the East Bay is a crossroads where species reaching the limits of their ranges take root.
In 1991, EBCNPS introduced a program identifying and tracking rare, unusual, and significant plants occurring within the two counties the chapter serves, with findings first published in 1992. Dianne Lake, a CNPS member since the early 1970s, pioneered the concept of producing a database of locally important species that was subsequently adopted by other chapters. “Dianne and members of the Rare and Unusual Plants Committee spent every weekend, 52 weeks a year for a decade, visiting every nook and cranny of the two counties,” reports Judy Schwartz, EBCNPS President. Volunteers update the database annually but can only cover portions of the 40 botanical regions of Contra Costa and Alameda counties defined by vegetation, geology, soil type, and habitats, leaving many populations unmonitored for years.

In January of 2006, the Bay Area Open Space Council asked EBCNPS to provide a list of important botanical areas not yet protected. The chapter was given only one day to accomplish the task. “At the end of the day, after a flurry of emails, 15 areas endowed with native plant diversity that are threatened by current and potential land-use decisions were hastily identified,” states the introduction to A Guidebook to Botanical Priority Protection Areas of the East Bay. “Our chapter is keenly aware of the challenge facing us to cope with the push to accommodate a growing tide of population drawn to the beauty of our unique East Bay landscape. California’s most enduring but ironically tragic character flaw is that it draws many people to a place of delicate and finite natural resources.” The Guidebook, completed in 2010 by Heath Bartosh, Lech Naumovich, and Laura Baker, is available at www.ebcnps.org.
“Once we had identified the 15 Botanical Priority Protection Areas,” explains Delia Taylor, EBCNPS Past President and current Funding and Development Chair, “we had our guide of where we should put our efforts proactively, not in last-minute campaigning but before land is slated for development.” She adds, “We write numerous comment letters on development and land acquisition proposals, attend meetings, speak at city council meetings and forums, and accompany officials in the field to discuss best practices regarding fuel breaks and vegetation management.”

Jim Hanson, EBCNPS Conservation Chair, began working with CNPS in the early 2000s when Richmond residents reviewed and rejected the plan to build a Las Vegas-style gambling casino on Point Molate. An ongoing source of concern, Point Molate is one of very few places in the area with ecosystems that can be preserved from the edge of the Bay through upland habitats. Offshore eelgrass supports diverse communities of waterfowl, fishes, and crustaceans.

Hanson notes, “EBCNPS collaborates with many other organizations and active community members on conservation issues of common concern.” Keeping up with all the meetings and deadlines is a challenge, but he finds especially rewarding “working with community members who give up their time in different ways to safeguard the ecologically diverse and scenic natural places that are special to the Bay Area.”

Seventeen years ago, Jane and Tom Kelly began volunteering at Point Isabel. “We observed the environmental degradation of a very important ecosystem, centered around Hoffman Marsh, and decided to do something about it,” Jane recalls. Removal of invasive plants and trash, and re-introduction of

Ian Stratford and his mother, Jean Stratford, pull the final offending fennel at Point Isabel. Photo by Jane Kelly.
appropriate native shrubs, trees, and grasses (nursed for two years by hand watering) is hard work. No pesticides are used! Jane estimates that several hundred volunteers—many non-members—contributed time in 2019, including 42 freshmen from Albany’s St. Mary’s College High School. “For us, it is rewarding to observe the significant increase in the bird and insect population each year.”

One dedicated individual demonstrating the power of habitat restoration can generate an impressive following of fellow volunteers. Glen Schneider, recipient of a 2018 Jefferson Award, started removing invasive plants along the Skyline Trail by himself. Now sponsored by EBMUD and EBCNPS, Skyline Gardens straddles the spine of the Berkeley Hills. The website reports, “It is the most botanically diverse area of its size (about 250 acres) in the entire East Bay. Two hundred and eighty-two native species have been identified so far.”

Springtown Preserve in northern Livermore is a rare alkali sink habitat that is home to many unusual species. EBCNPS is supporting the City of Livermore’s upcoming citizen science effort to document species at the Springtown site. Typically, a BioBlitz counts every species discerned within a 24-hour period. Due to the Preserve’s sensitive ecosystem, the April 19th Springtown event restricts access and time on site. A decontamination station will prevent introduction of outside material. Members of the public are welcome to visit and learn about this unique area. “Documenting the species here will bolster efforts to protect this unique and threatened ecosystem,” notes Megan Verner-Crist, City of Livermore CivicSpark Fellow.
Lesley Hunt, EBCNPS Past President, chairs the Native Here Nursery Committee. John Danielson supported his wife Charli in establishing the nursery and continues her work. “Most nurseries that sell native plants are focused on gardening,” Hunt remarks. “Native Here also grows plants for restoration, so knowing where seeds come from is critical. Native Here has permits from landowners to gather seed and carefully calculates the quantity harvested so the resource continues to thrive. We gather seed every week during the eight- to nine-month period when it is most available, less frequently during the winter.” Organized by Contra Costa and Alameda County botanical regions to aid gardeners in selecting appropriate plants, the nursery is open year-round. Check www.nativeherenursery.org for hours, directions, and a schedule of informative talks.

As Outreach Chair, Hunt asks groups interested in scheduling a program to contact her at least a month in advance. Lesley tailors talks for garden clubs, community organizations, and academic institutions and brings presentation materials to meetings and events. Disseminating accurate information about sensitive subjects like wildfire prevention is important. “More fear and misinformation is being applied to creating fire breaks than straight thinking,” she warns. “The challenge is to get people to accept and apply knowledge based on scientific facts.”

“Birds and animals can move in the face of development. Plants can’t. But getting public support for a program to protect a rare endemic plant is not as easy as generating interest in a save-the-baby-sea-otter campaign,” Schwartz notes while describing the plight of pallid manzanitas.
threatened by soil-borne disease and overgrown habitats. Her own property is a native plant oasis. “When a large habitat near our house was destroyed a few years ago, birds moved into our yard. Our native plants feed them, and the birdbath gives them water year-round.”

Valuing common native plants is vital. Taylor writes, “Coyote bushes provide pollen and nectar in fall and winter for pollinators, harbor numerous kinds of beneficial insects, offer food and cover for birds and small mammals. They serve as ‘nurse plants’ for oaks and other trees. They stay green all year, are drought tolerant and unpalatable to deer, and can be trimmed and shaped.”

EBCNPS invites everyone to learn more about native plants, chapter activities and events, volunteer opportunities, news, and more at www.ebcnps.org.

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The mission of the East Bay chapter of the California Native Plant Society is to conserve California native plants and their natural habitats, and increase understanding, appreciation, and horticultural use of native plants.

The California Native Plant Society was formed in 1965 in the East Bay region. Today it is a statewide organization with 35 chapters. The East Bay Chapter covers Alameda and Contra Costa counties.