

A blooming rebirth



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Environmental studies student Jared Marchese, from left, UC Santa Cruz Chancellor George Blumenthal and Sylvia Childress plant a rare wild Franciscan manzanita seedling Wednesday.

Wild plant last seen in 1947 now taking root

Endangered Species

By Lisa M. Krieger

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Rescued from the verge of extinction, a single wild specimen of a rare California plant now has hundreds of progeny — celebrated Wednesday in a festive planting ceremony at the UC Santa Cruz arboretum.

A reversal of fate at a time of so many tough environmental challenges, the future of the Franciscan manzanita now seems secure.

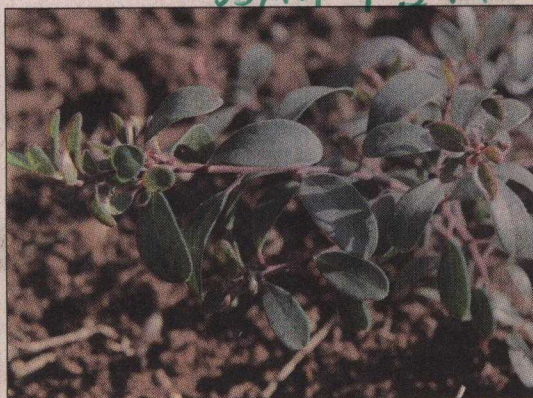
On a sun-drenched afternoon, two of the precious seedlings were nestled into holes along an ocean-facing hillside, gently covered with soil, then ogled by admirers.

Even UCSC Chancellor George Blumenthal, a distinguished theoretical astrophysicist who studies the origin of matter in the universe, seemed in awe.

Handed a shovel, he joked, "I want the right person to be doing this," and passed the tool to 23-year-old environmental studies student Jared Marchese.

Generations of botanists had long given up hope of finding Franciscan manzanita in the wild. While a narrow strain of cultivars had been preserved in captivity, the last wild specimen had been seen on a bluff at San Francisco's Laurel Hill cemetery in 1947. Then, the cemetery — and the plant — were destroyed.

However, in October 2009, a botanist driving



Long thought extinct, a shrub of wild Franciscan manzanita was discovered in a center divider of a freeway by a botanist in 2009. That plant's cuttings produced the seedlings planted at UC Santa Cruz.

home from work spotted the rare shrub in the middle of a center divider of a freeway exposed by construction near the Golden Gate Bridge.

"It's like finding the ivory-billed woodpecker," said UCSC grad student Michael Vasey, a manzanita expert who was summoned to the site.

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Rick Flores, curator of native plants at the UC Santa Cruz arboretum, carries an Ohlone manzanita that was planted Wednesday. Two types of rare manzanita plants received new homes at the college.

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Manzanita

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The plant was painstakingly excavated and relocated to an undisclosed location in San Francisco's Presidio.

But to be successfully moved, the plant needed to be expertly trimmed. From its discarded branches, many cuttings were taken to the UCSC arboretum and several other botanical gardens.

"You do it in the shade, in cool weather, with clean clippers," said Stephen McCabe, director of development and research at the arboretum. "Then, you nick the base of the wood and place it in peat and Perlite, with rooting hormone, in a greenhouse environment with a mist system."

From that single plant, a total of 424 healthy seedlings are growing — and there is security in numbers.

Spread far and wide

Of these, UCSC's arboretum has 20 of the green youngsters. Their siblings have been distributed to five other locales: the Presidio's native plant nursery, the San Francisco Botanical Garden, the UC Berkeley Botanical Garden, the Regional Parks Botanical Garden in Berkeley's Tilden Park and Sonoma County's Cal Flora, a commercial nursery specializing in manzanitas.

"This special plant is a wonderful example of the many rare and threatened plants that the UCSC arboretum is helping to preserve," Blumenthal said. "The arboretum is a valuable resource for researchers and students, and the San

Francisco manzanita is an outstanding addition to its rich and diverse collection."

An iconic plant

Also on Wednesday, UCSC botanists planted an offspring of the Ohlone manzanita, found exclusively on Lockheed property in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The well-drained landscape, littered with gray-green serpentine rock, is thought to be an ideal site for the shrubs. Many of the coastal rocky formations that were once home to the plants now have buildings perched on them, a loss of habitat that threatens the manzanita.

Manzanitas are California's iconic plant, Vasey said. There are more than 96 species, distinctive for their reddish bark and pink, bell-shaped flowers.

But coastal Central California is the epicenter of the genus, he said.

As the scientists explained, the newly planted youngsters will bring valuable genetic diversity to the arboretum's collection, which is important for maintaining the species.

"Saving wild plants, and wild places, is the best way to go," said McCabe. "But when we're down to just one plant, the arboretum can help."

Eventually, the plants will help the U.S. National Park Service rebuild a long-lost habitat to San Francisco, called Maritime Chaparral.

"It sets the stage for an amazing recovery," Vasey said. "We can bring back the species, and bring back its habitat."

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