

Cambrian Resident

FRIDAY, JUNE 20, 2025

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HEALTHY LIVING

More than meets the eye

Local agencies partnering for multisensory outdoor experiences. **Page 6**



COURTESY PHOTO

A participant in a multisensory educational walk through San Jose's Heritage Rose Garden stops to smell a bloom. The Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority and Bay Area Older Adults teamed up to test the hypothesis that multisensory educational walks in green spaces would improve the health and wellbeing of people with visual impairment and dementia.

COMMENTARY

Federal, state aid so far to victims of the L.A. fires bodes ill for future

So far, the federal government is in large part failing the victims of Los Angeles County's January firestorms that swept through the Pacific Palisades and Altadena areas. Things are not how President Trump said they would be.



Thomas Elias

"We're going to have you go very quickly," he promised the fire victims at a news conference staged with Gov. Gavin Newsom and Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass while the ashes of the Palisades fire still smoked nearby.

That's in part because Trump and other Republicans have linked any substantial aid package to political preconditions, an unprecedented attempt to leverage a major disaster against ideological opponents. Among those goals, thus far resisted by state officials, are changes in water management policies to disregard most endangered species and adopting voter identification laws, a longtime Republican goal.

So much for the American tradition of nonpartisan disaster relief. There's also Trump's concerted attempt to downsize and virtually eliminate the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which has taken charge of aftermath measures in virtually all wildfire or hurricane disasters of the last several decades. Trump wants to farm out FEMA's work to the states and provide far less disaster relief funding than in previous episodes.

That's not the spoken reason FEMA refuses to perform analyses of toxic substances in the



JAE C. HONG — ASSOCIATED PRESS ARCHIVES

Renata Ortega stands March 29 in what was her Altadena home, which was destroyed by Los Angeles County's January firestorm that swept through the Altadena and Pacific Palisades areas. The federal and state governments' response so far to the fires suggests the recovery from them may be slower than after previous big California wildfires, with even worse responses likely after future fires.

topsoil remaining on burned-out lots in the Palisades and Eaton fire footprints, saying only that the scraping of top layers of each lot by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers gives sufficient protection from toxics.

Recent soil testing by Los Angeles County officials found elevated lead and arsenic levels at destroyed homes already cleared by Army crews in Altadena, but FEMA officials maintain that removing wildfire debris and up to 6 inches of topsoil is good enough to eliminate immediate public health risks.

What about burned-out homeowners, though, virtually none of whom are getting toxics-testing funds as part of their homeowner insurance settlements? They have little or no money for testing, which is one reason only about 200 rebuilding permits had been taken out in the Palisades fire

area as of late May.

The most common suggestion among researchers and fire victims is for the state to step in where FEMA refuses. However, Newsom faces a \$12 billion state budget deficit. Every dollar spent on toxics testing for homeowners could be a dollar taken from anything from public schools to state parks to sewer and highway maintenance.

So state aid is not likely, especially since the Palisades fire area was previously among the state's wealthiest enclaves, with an abundance of home valued at more than \$3 million. Who's going to pull a building permit, though, and stand by while framing of their future home rises from the ashes if they have reason to believe those ashes might somehow poison them?

Cartoonist's take



LISA BENSON

HEALTH

Walking with all 5 senses can improve health for people with disabilities

By Anne Ferguson

Many of us experience nature mainly with one sense — our sight — appreciating bright orange poppies, purple lupines, yellow buttercups and more amid the medley of spring wildflowers.

But nature offers more than just colors, and studies have shown that using all the senses can be good for your health. The scent of pearly everlasting flowers could take you back to the days when you drenched grandma's pancakes with your favorite maple syrup. Taking a bite of the tip of a pickleweed stem might bring back memories of dill pickles with a favorite Reuben sandwich. Listening to the hum of bees pollinating California lilac could calm your heart. Mythology suggests that chaparral bush mallow was a healing gift from the gods not only because

of its delicate mauve flowers but also because of its shallow-lobed leaves, covered with soft hairs, that are soothing to the touch.

Some scientific evaluations suggest that this multisensory characteristic of nature heals us. Over the past 20 years, multisensory stimulation has been evaluated as a non-pharmacological intervention for people living with dementia and other persons with disabilities. A meta-analysis of 16 studies, including 974 dementia patients, indicated that multisensory stimulation may be a promising first line of treatment, as it significantly reduced depression and improved mood and cognitive function.

Ancient Roman texts suggest that green spaces promote health. In the early 1800s, the British government noted that parks "would diminish annual

Elias

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Andrew Whelton, a Purdue University professor and researcher on post-wildfire contamination, told a reporter that comprehensive soil testing is critical for the affected areas' future health and safety. Newsom at one point asked FEMA to perform detailed tests, but said his request was nixed less than a day he posed it.

It's been similar for him on Capitol Hill forays to seek \$40 billion in general disaster relief for the winter fires. So far, not a penny of that has cleared the Republican-led Congress. Los Angeles County, meanwhile, did step up in unincorporated Altadena, providing \$3 million for soil testing for homeowners downwind of the Eaton fire.

However, Purdue's Whelton said that effort — with homeowners submitting one sample to a commercial lab and then having to interpret data on their own — will not provide reliable risk analysis even for people wanting to return to homes that did not burn. That paltry effort has not been matched by the city of Los Angeles, which includes Pacific Palisades. The city is battling its own budget deficit of more than a billion dollars.

It adds up to colossal disappointment for all but the wealthiest, who can fund their own testing and analysis, and suggests recovery from the winter fires may not only be far slower than Trump promised but also slower than after previous major California wildfires, with even worse performances likely after fires yet to come.

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Ferguson

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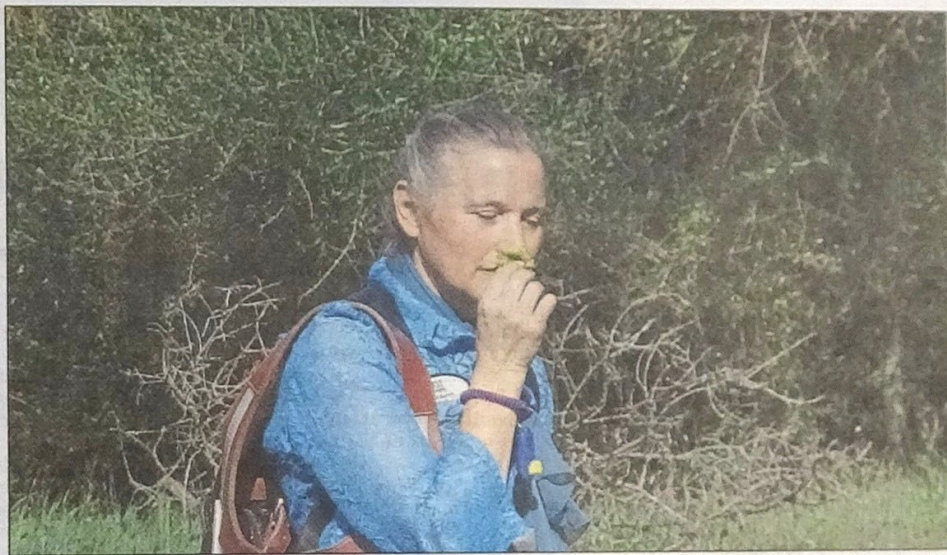
deaths by thousands and add several years to the lives of the entire population." In modern times, substantial evidence suggests that for many of us, spending time in nature improves health and wellbeing through reduced stress, anxiety, depression and blood pressure, and promotes outcomes such as positive mood and relaxation. A large cohort study suggests that living in some green space is associated with decreased risk of dementia and Parkinson's disease.

Two local organizations are testing these ideas and bringing multisensory nature experiences to people in Santa Clara County. The Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority and Bay Area Older Adults (BAO) teamed up to promote inclusion and engagement for people with disabilities and test the hypothesis that multisensory educational walks in green spaces would improve the health and wellbeing of people with visual impairment and dementia.

While there are a few examples of manmade sensory outdoor walking trails in Maryland, New York and Florida, and lessons on how to lead sensory nature walks, BAO's innovative program incorporates natural sounds (running creeks, bird songs), smells (scent of California sagebrush), touch (textured leaves) and even tastes (mushrooms, pickleweed) into the walking program.

Studies indicate that safety and accessibility are the most common barriers for people with disabilities looking to engage with nature. Programs that offer transportation, guided walks, paved trails and easy parking make a big difference. The Open Space Authority, which manages multiple open space preserves in Santa Clara County, has long recognized that natural lands are a tremendous health resource for local communities.

"Everyone deserves access to the benefits of nature," says Andrea Mackenzie, the authority's general manager. "That's why we at the Open Space Authority work hard to protect and care for



COURTESY PHOTO

A participant in a multisensory educational walk takes in some flora at Los Gatos Creek County Park in Campbell. Studies that included 974 dementia patients indicated that multisensory stimulation significantly reduced depression and improved mood and cognitive function.

these natural and working lands — so that they can care for everyone in return."

The Open Space Authority has accessible trails at Rancho Canada Del Oro and Máyyan 'Ooyákma — Coyote Ridge Open Space Preserves as well as parking spaces, restrooms and picnic tables. Planning and design are also underway to provide public access improvements, including an accessible trail and use areas at Coyote Valley Open Space Preserve.

For BAO, the partnership program offers great opportunities to improve the health and wellbeing of adults with diverse abilities. The Open Space Authority has really come through on its promise to build and maintain spaces that are accessible to all. Through Measure T funding, the authority supported our multisensory educational outdoor programs for people with disabilities and their caregivers, enabling them to safely access nature.

The BAO program is safe and accessible because it is tailored to the needs of all older adults, starting with transportation to parks all over Santa Clara County. Each walk has a supportive team of first aid- and mobility-trained guides, so everyone can feel safe and comfortable going at their own pace. Walking

trails are inspected to ensure the terrain, elevation change and distance are appropriate, and participants can focus on enjoying the outdoors, learning and socializing.

With Measure T funding, BAO was able to take adults with early stage dementia and their caregivers to local parks and gardens such as San Jose's Japanese Friendship Garden, Vasona Lake County Park in Los Gatos and McClellan Ranch in Cupertino.

"Multisensory stimulation is an approach that may provide cognitive benefits for people living with dementia, and may help improve their mood," says Vanessa Souza, a licensed clinical social worker and senior manager at the Northern California and Northern Nevada Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association and another program partner. "These programs are vital to the emotional health of our clients and equally important for their caregivers."

The two agencies' message is simple: Everyone should have a chance to enjoy the health benefits of being outdoors, no matter their age, experience or ability. Surveying 620 participants using a validated measure of general health indicated that the program improved their general

health.

Participants agree. "The nature walks have improved my mood and health," says Sandy, 73, who learned about wildflowers on the accessible trail at Rancho Canada del Oro Open Space Preserve. "These nature walks allow me to walk longer, and I feel better. I enjoy the fresh air and being in green spaces. My physical activity has improved overall."

"My thinking and memory are boosted," says Gaby, a visually impaired person who regularly takes advantage of these outdoor programs. "Also, my stamina and breathing improve with each outing. Being in nature helps comfort me and relaxes my senses. The sounds of the air, the bird songs, the streams wake me up to explore what is around me."

For more information on Bay Area Older Adults' free outdoor activities, visit BayAreaOlderAdults.org. For more information on Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority's preserves and their current and future accessibility features, visit OpenSpaceAuthority.org/accessibility.

Dr. Anne Ferguson is executive director of Bay Area Older Adults.