



CELEBRATING EARTH DAY WITH STEWARDSHIP

April is Whidbey Earth and Ocean Month, and marks the 50th anniversary of Earth Day.

This year's Earth Day will be experienced through the lense of a global pandemic, which is expected to peak near the end of the month. Many of us are staying home and social distancing. Others are working 60+ hour weeks to provide essential services to communities rocked with uncertainty. Each day brings a new aspect to this experience and changes our lives again.

There's something we can all depend on, though, and that is nature continuing around us. Tulips and Hyacinth have blossomed. Native bumblebees are busily and noisily visiting hot pink Red Flowering Currant and Salmonberry blooms. The grass is growing and the robins are nesting on bright blue eggs.

It's an opportunity and a blessing to be able to celebrate the Earth right now. We may not be able to celebrate in the ways we have in the past - with tree plantings and outdoor work parties, workshops and education, and community celebrations - but even without these events, the beauty of nature is we are in it, no matter where we live and what our circumstances. We can still celebrate the earth together this month through stewardship activities.

Stewardship first means recognizing our planet is an interactive community of plants, animals, soil, and water, and the actions we take in our homes and yards affect the natural world around us. Then we can take actions to benefit us all. As Eric Mader of Northwest Meadowscares puts it "humanity's work should complement nature's."

The National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has held a National Stewardship Week at the end of every April since 1955, encouraging communities across the U.S. to come together and carry out stewardship projects. Starting Earth Day, April 22, and continuing until the end of the month, let's come together on Whidbey and work on some stewardship projects.

One of the first and best things you can do to become an environmental steward is to find a place in nature you love. It may take some adventuring to find a place, or you may already have one in mind! Take time to go to your place as often as you can. Observe

and learn all you can about it. Experience it in different seasons, times of day, and moods. As Robert Pelant of Pacific Rim Institute points out, "We take care of that which we love, and we cannot love something unless we know about it."

Learn the names of some different trees and shrubs in your yard, in your neighborhood, or on your favorite nature walk. Choose a few plants that stand out to you and identify them. You can use an app like Picture This!, look on a plant website such as Washington Native Plant Society, or ask at a nursery. No matter how many plants you know, there's always more to learn, which is fun.

Create natural habitat on your property or in your neighborhood. Native plants are species that originated or evolved in the soils, topography, and climate of the Pacific Northwest. They grow with little maintenance and have good immune systems against diseases and pests. They provide habitat for pollinators, birds, and wildlife, and can reduce soil erosion. We need more natural habitat on Whidbey Island and in many places around the world, and there's no better time to get started establishing one than right now.

Remove noxious weeds on your property or in your neighborhood. Noxious weeds invade large areas and outcompete more beneficial plants. Removing them before they can go to seed is an important way to keep them from spreading. You can learn about Washington's noxious weeds on the Island County Noxious Weed Control Board website.

Befriend the soil. There are more than 4 billion organisms in a spoonful of healthy soil. This amazing ecosystem beneath our feet is filled with remarkable symbiotic processes in which plant roots, fungi, and organisms interact with each other in ways we don't fully understand yet. Healthy soil absorbs storm water and is less susceptible to erosion. It's also a carbon sink that pulls carbon out of the air and sequesters it. Dig up some handfuls of soil around your yard and see what you can learn.

We hope the ideas above will get you started as a steward of our Earth, and you'll join us starting April 22 to put on stewardship projects in celebration of Earth Day and Stewardship Week. Visit Whidbey Island Conservation District's website, whidbeycd.org, for resources and suggestions of stewardship projects you can do at home.



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