

Community

Summer-Fall Newsletter 2021



THANK YOU

Whether you've partnered with us this year in garden installation, financial support, greenhouse volunteering, educational events, or simply following our journey - thank you!

It takes a whole watershed community to rewrite the way we interact with land and heal our creek.
We could not do it without you.

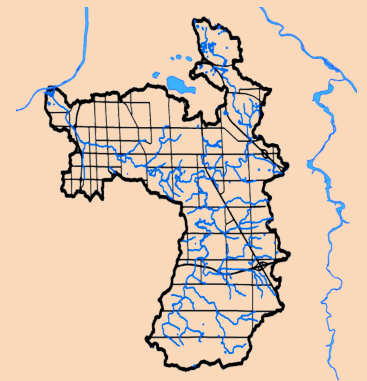


Support Our Work

Want to support watershed restoration?
Your end-of-year gifts will enable a Urban Watershed Restoration Intern to manage our largest existing project sites for two years, ensuring greater native plant biodiversity, and water quality improvement success in downstream urban sites.
<https://calvin.quadweb.site/giving/plaster-creek-stewards>

Plaster Creek Watershed

The Plaster Creek Watershed occupies a portion of the ancestral home of the Hopewell people (Goodall Focus), and more recently the Anishinaabe Three Fires Confederacy of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi nations. We are grateful for the way these people cared for the land and loved it. We are informed by their teachings and strive to honor their example through ongoing education and restoration work.



Plaster Creek Stewards

Plaster Creek Stewards is a collaboration of Calvin University, community partners, and residents focusing on education, research, and restoration in an effort to return health and beauty to the Plaster Creek Watershed.

SUMMER SUPERCREW

Thanks to funding from four grants and the Calvin Science Division, we were able to hire 15 Calvin University students this summer! They worked on research projects, mentored the Green Team, and installed 17 curb-cut rain gardens and other green infrastructure projects.

The efficiency and teamwork of this supercrew meant that they chewed through large projects and rounds of rain gardens in record time. This opened our schedule up for a day of exploration, which we spent experiencing Plaster Creek in a fresh and up-close way.



Plaster Creek Hike + Discovery



Taking a break on a midstream sandbank

On a classic West Michigan summer Friday morning, July 2, the PCS summer work crew and staff (16 people total) set off on a creek hike, starting at the bus stop on Calvin's campus enroute to Ken-O-Sha Park. Because hiking the entire stretch of Plaster Creek would likely require more than a single day, we planned out a more do-able 1-day hike from Ken-O-Sha School, to where Plaster Creek joins the Grand River and back to the downtown bus station. In terms of natural quality, we started out in one of the nicest sections of the watershed and walked downstream toward some of the most degraded sections.

The hike gave ample time to have playful and thoughtful conversations among the crew, and plenty of time to reflect on the ways this creek has been mistreated by people over the years. We encountered deer, evidence of beaver activity, multiple homeless camps, some amazing graffiti on bridge underpasses, two lost young mountain biking boys, lots of trash, but also an amazing amount of lingering, resilient beauty.

One of the most surprising discoveries was made after passing under US 131 in a severely altered area just south of Burton Street. On the west edge of a large power line right-of-way we noticed a small patch of high-quality sedge meadow. When we went to investigate the wetland patch we were greeted by frogs and dragonflies, and the dominant sedge *Carex trichocarpa* (Hairy-fruited sedge), a plant that because of its decline over the years is listed as a state special concern species. This site is likely a tiny remnant of extensive meadows that historically occupied this part of Grand Rapids. Fortunately, Dave Warners had some seed bags in his pocket and we eagerly collected ripe *Carex trichocarpa* seeds that we will attempt to grow into robust plants for restoration projects next year.

After a well-deserved rest at Roosevelt Park and renewed energy fortified by taco trucks nearby, we pressed on through the highly industrialized area in the downstream reaches of the watershed. By the time we stood on Market Street watching Plaster Creek empty into the Grand River, we had walked over 10 miles and the temperature was well up into the 80s. In follow-up conversations, the summer crew was grateful for the chance to experience the creek in this 'intimate' way and they urged that this creek hike become an annual event, an idea we intend to honor.



Some segments were paved trails



Railroad overpass downstream



A heron and gar seen near the Grand River



Taking a break under an overpass



Finding *Carex trichocarpa*

GREEN TEAM

Like our team of summer researchers, the Green Team this year was a mega-crew!

Two teams of 6 students from the watershed joined us for 3 weeks of working, learning, and exploring in our watershed community.

These 12 students installed rain gardens and bioswales, met with environmentally-minded professionals in our community, snorkeled in the Rogue River, and examined the varying environmental quality of communities along Plaster Creek.



“Environmental racism and injustice allowed us to come to an understanding that affluent neighborhoods obtain resources that impoverished neighborhoods did not have access to. It was really cool to hear other people’s point of views on their own experiences living by the watershed. ”

-YenTran, 2021 GT Student

“One experience that brought it all together was one of the speakers, Ron Yob. One of his quotes that stuck out to me was 'you can't be angry about things that you can do something about and the things you can't do anything about.' It taught me that you can make a difference in your own local ecology.”

-Luke, 2021 GT Student

“I really loved coming back week after week seeing everyone’s faces and just working together to achieve the goal by the end of the day. And with the other college students, it was a really cool opportunity to talk with them and ask about college life and the greenhouse and infrastructure in the area. Overall, making friends and having fun was the best part.

-Wendy, 2021 GT Student

In 2020 we strengthened our commitment to justice by writing out our Commitment to Antiracism and our Land Acknowledgement. In 2021, we focused on educating ourselves and developing our capacity to be a diverse and justice-seeking organization in the Plaster Creek Watershed. Critical to this growth were two intentional conversations with experts who visited our Green Team, summer research students, and staff.

Diversity Training



This summer we partnered with PennyLynn Dystra-Pruim to put on four Cultural Intelligence training sessions built for our high school students. In these workshops, PCS summer researchers, Green Team members, and staff identified characteristics of their cultures and subcultures, explored problem-solving across cultural differences, and learned more about the value of intercultural collaboration to address our biggest climate and watershed issues. The rich diversity of our student groups this year brought a variety of perspectives to the table that made our conversations all the more meaningful.



Visit with Chairman Ron Yob

This summer Ron Yob, Chairman of the Grand River Bands of Ottawa Indians, joined us for a morning of teaching and learning in the woods at the greenhouses. He shared with our Green Team students, researchers, and staff stories from growing up, his leadership and action in the American Indian Movement, and his impactful work as a middle school teacher reconnecting Indigenous children with their cultures.



Fall Event 2021

Environmental Justice in Our Watershed



At this year's Fall Event, Dr. Gail Gunst-Heffner spoke about environmental justice in our watershed and what can be done to address it. After the talk, we had a blast transplanting sedges and planting native trees on Calvin's campus. Thank you to all the volunteers who joined in to make the day one to remember!



PLANTING PARTNERS!

This summer + fall we enjoyed partnering with over 17 partners in the community! Bioswales, pollinator gardens, rain gardens, and educational events were all a part of our shared work. Among our partners are:

- Grand Rapids Christian High
- Grand Rapids Christian Middle
- Godwin Heights Middle
- Godfrey Lee Elementary
- Young Evangelicals for Climate Action
- Calvin University Streetfest Students
- Linc Up - Rock the Park 2021
- NorthPointe Christian Schools
- Christian Reformed Church of North America Headquarters
- Brewery Vivant
- Roosevelt Park Neighborhood Association
- Church of the Servant
- Holland Home
- Sherman Street Church
- Michigan Botanical Club
- Michigan Garden Club
- The Potter's House Middle



Photo Credit John Park - right top and bottom



Curb Cut Rain Garden

Highlight

In her third summer with Plaster Creek Stewards, Ana Singh (Battle Creek, MI; Biology student) took a new role as Green Infrastructure Associate. She began by assessing curb cut rain garden sites and then co-lead installation of 17 gardens in one summer! This feat begins with looking at each potential site after homeowners fill out a voluntary application. She spends hours on each site checking drainage area leading to the garden, size of the garden, obstacles like signs and trees, water pipes and other infrastructures, and road construction schedules. Then she checks the soils at each location to assure that they will drain quickly (sandy soil is best). Next up, she contacts the site owners to make sure they understand how to maintain a curb cut rain garden and asks them to agree to maintain it after installation. Then she works with Deanna Geelhoed, Program Coordinator, to set up excavation, order soil and mulch, choose plants, and plan for workers to help install the gardens. Installation week is all hands on deck to shape, spread compost/woodchips, and finally plant. Sediment traps are built another day, and finally the curbs are cut a month or more later when the plants have sunk their roots into the ground. Finally, Ana uses Adobe Illustrator to draw colorful maps with native plant names and photos to help homeowners get to know and maintain their gardens.



This month, Ana published her first scientific research article with Dr. Dave Warners in the University of Wisconsin's Ecological Restoration Journal. The research was begun by previous Calvin students and Ana worked hard to complete the data compilations and produce the article, which can be read here: <http://calvin.edu/go/CCRG-Plants>. Ana brings her knowledge, hard work, contagious laughter, and leadership skills to our team, and we are so grateful for her.