



## Featured Project - West Hills Resident Works with WMSWCD to Create Oak Savanna

It often takes time for someone to decide they're ready to tackle a habitat restoration project, especially one with many moving parts and a long-term commitment to maintenance, but Ashley Offensend was enthusiastic from the get-go. Ashley had seen an article we published in the Skyline Ridge Runner in early 2016 about ways to restore our increasingly rare Oregon white oak habitat and he was immediately interested. He proactively reached out to the conservation district about improving habitat on his 20 acres of forest and former pasture and was persistent in his interest. He followed up with Multnomah County on information we shared about tax incentive options and secured a special assessment for "Open Space," that allows him to manage his land for natural resource values.



In 2017, we surveyed the land and developed a conservation plan to convert 10 acres of pasture to native oak savanna. That fall, we began removal of blackberry followed by native grass seeding on 2 acres of steep slope. We applied to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to tap our newly developed oak habitat restoration funding pool; the project was ranked highly and was awarded a contract in early 2018. In fall of 2018, we applied for and received a grant from the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB). These two sources provided \$30,000 toward project costs.

We worked hard throughout 2018 inventorying plants, completing site analysis and paperwork required for funding, and developing the specifications for how the various aspects of the project would be implemented. With the help of paid crews and the Offensends' own labor, we continued to get the site ready for new native plants. The full scope of the project includes:

- managing invasive weeds like shiny geranium, herb Robert, teasel, Canada thistle, poison hemlock, blackberry, spurge laurel, holly and English hawthorn
- converting a third-acre of former pasture to a native plant hedgerow to benefit pollinators, removing grass and adding mulch
- planting native trees and shrubs on the property's steep slope
- planting clusters of oak trees to create the open grass savanna interspersed with oaks
- establishing native wildflowers in meadow patches and in the hedgerow via seed and small plants from a native plant nursery
- mounting bluebird boxes in the savanna, and
- constructing wildlife rock- and brush-piles at the forest edge, where invasive blackberry cover was removed.



2019 and 2020 saw the continuation of weed control and the beginning of planting. Crews installed nearly 5,000 native shrubs and trees of 15 different species this past winter, and we will add another 1,500 plants this fall. Trees species include Oregon white oak, madrone, and Willamette Valley ponderosa pine – all drought tolerant and fire resilient – along with Scouler willow, and native species of hawthorne, cherry, crabapple, and hazelnut. We're also seeding over 3 dozen native wildflower and grass species.

The OWEB grant expires this year, but the NRCS funding continues through 2022. The Offensends will maintain the planted areas into the future and gradually increase coverage of native wildflowers where there was previously pasture. The multi-year and multi-faceted project has been an effective collaboration of partners that depends on the passion of Ashley and his family. Their commitment to care for rare and declining Oregon white oak savanna gives us confidence that we have made a lasting and meaningful impact on our native landscape.

*below: Elk graze in Offensend's future savanna, photo courtesy of Ashley Offensend*



*above: Crews plant cuttings for a native hedgerow, photo by WMSWCD  
below: After many years, Offensend's newly planted Oregon white oak (Quercus garryana) trees should look something like this tree on Sauvie Island, photo by Erica J. Mitchell*

