

Students and Community Members Weed Sueño Orchard Tree Beds in Preparation for Summer and Fall Harvest

Yiu-On Li (he/him), IVRPD Intern

Fueled by granola bars and mandarin oranges, with gloves, shovels, and rakes in hand, volunteers for Isla Vista Recreation & Park District on June 3 attacked and uprooted the weeds of Sueño Orchard's disc golf tee and tree beds, restoring access to the fruit trees' water and nutrients. The day was part of the district's Stewardship Saturdays series of park maintenance events.

"When we maintenance our fruit trees, they're a lot happier," Carlos Velasco, the IVRPD grounds lead, said. "The weeds are kind of their competition, and they take the water and the nutrients from the soil. And we want to make sure that the trees get plenty, so we can have a nice crop of fruit for the community."

Velasco was referring to the openness of the orchard: anyone can harvest, at no cost, whatever fruit they find when the trees produce them at the end of spring, during summer, and at the beginning of fall, according to Laila Kleinberg, a second-year anthropology major at UC Santa Barbara (UCSB) and the coordinator of the event.

"All of the fruit and anything grown here is accessible to the public and the community," she said. "So if you ever walk by and you see a fruit blooming—like a citrus or anything like that—you can pick it."

Guavas, macadamia nuts, avocados, peaches, nectarines, plums, apples, pears, persimmons, oranges, lemons, limes, and more—when it comes to the offerings of the orchard, "there isn't a fruit I don't like," Velasco said.

Thirty-one volunteers, many from the UCSB Edible Campus Program and the UCSB AS Environmental Affairs Board, contributed to the weeding. One such volunteer was Anika Jena, a first-year chemical engineering major at UCSB, who appreciated working under a cherimoya tree surrounded by poppies.

"It's a way to destress and remind myself of the beautiful place that I'm in right before dead week—and to make sure that I don't fall into the mindset of being dead during dead week," Jena said.

According to Velasco, IVRPD engages in a weeding effort on this scale about once every two months.

"A lot of weeds, like the dandelions, spread by the wind—wherever they land, that's where they germinate," Velasco said. "They just grow. Life finds a way."

IVRPD intends to replace about half a dozen of the trees—which produce less fruit as they age—next spring, with additional trees to be added in the future, according to Velasco. But IVRPD must consider one sporty wrinkle, he said: the orchard is home to two disc golf baskets.

“We have to keep in mind, for our Frisbee players in the community, to keep a clear lane for them to throw—but the trees make it very challenging for them,” he said. “But we will be adding some trees away from the line of sight of the Frisbee golf people.”

Overall, for those living in apartments, away from swathes of earth, Velasco emphasized how important it is for them “to get their hands dirty.”

“An event like this, you make new friends—the people who come and work, that volunteer here, they meet other volunteers and they make new friends and share ideas,” Velasco said. “And that’s the whole spirit of the community.”