

Get your hands dirty -- Volunteer opportunities for people 55 and up

Maureen McGarry/For the Times-Standard



Spring is upon us and the warm winter has produced a lush landscape of volunteer opportunities. Many community members are defying the stereotype of what it means to be older by getting involved in various levels of physical volunteer work. It is not about how old you are, but how young you feel. There is something for everybody in various outdoor volunteer activities.

Weather and the elements have never stopped Hikshari Trail volunteers as they plant native plants and remove non-native grasses along the Elk River trail where it empties into Humboldt Bay. Volunteers meet on the second Saturday of each month, and are part of the Humboldt Volunteer Trail Stewards.

There are always things to do at the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center that is home for Friends of the Dunes on Stamps Road in Manila. Linda Alm, a monthly volunteer, said, "Since I joined in 1982, I have been privileged to work with this amazing group of volunteers. Now that I'm older, I see opportunities for older people because the terrain and the weather are so gentle here."

Suzie Fortner, Friends of the Dunes Education coordinator, said that volunteer opportunities include removing non-native plants in the dunes and native landscaping, which involves sitting in the sand and pulling up vegetation in the area surrounding the Nature Center. This takes place the first and third Wednesday of each month from 5-6:30 p.m. "Uprooting European beach grass and lupine are typically on Saturday and can require more physically demanding work," said Fortner.

Volunteer Trail Stewards meet the third Saturday of each month at the Nature Center from 9 a.m. to noon. Activities can include repairing signage and clearing brush.

Trail Stewards also work in the Arcata Community Forest every fourth Saturday. Volunteers of various ages help build trails. This past weekend, forest volunteers -- several over 55 -- helped Arcata's Environmental Service staff repair illegal encampments in the forest, as well as other trail maintenance.

"A class of HSU students had identified encampments during a school project. Public safety cleared out the campers. Saturday's volunteers made it look like there was never a camp there. This is a project where community involvement is supporting the health of a public asset," said Trail Steward Coordinator Rees Hughes.

If planting plants is more to your liking, growing fruits and vegetables is among the regular activities for volunteers at Potawot Community Garden. The two-and-a-half acre garden contains several greenhouses, making it a pleasant place to garden on a rainy day. Susan Anderson has volunteered at Potawot for several years. She took some time off this winter, but will be returning this spring to help out.

"There's a great crew of fun people to work with. It's rewarding and satisfying to see how the garden changes through the seasons," said Anderson. "It's nice to work in someone else's garden because they make all the decisions, and I just get to play in the dirt."

All of these organizations partner with RSVP to encourage people 55 or older to get involved. Anyone can sign up by contacting RSVP at the Volunteer Center of the Redwoods at 442-3763. Enjoy the beauty of our beautiful county by digging in and getting dirty.

Maureen McGarry is the project director for VCOR and RSVP, programs of the Area 1 Agency on Aging.