Calvin University's Plaster Creek Stewards Program

The Cascade Township Parks Committee wants to know if you know your watershed address? Parts of Cascade Township shed their stormwater to Plaster Creek, while the rest flows into the Thornapple River. What can Cascade Township and its residents do to learn about and take good care of their local waters?

Over the past 150 years of changing land use and development, Plaster Creek has become one of the most polluted and degraded creeks in West Michigan. This 16-mile creek flows into the Grand River just south of Grand Rapids, after which the Grand River proceeds west out to Lake Michigan, bringing with it pollutants including sediment, bacteria, chemicals, excess nutrients, salt, and even heat. This creek has been a valuable resource to a diverse set of communities from the headwaters of rural Dutton through Kentwood, Southeast Grand Rapids, Roosevelt Park, Wyoming, and the Black Hills neighborhood all the way to the Grand River. We know communities are at their best when all of their members are thriving together. The problem is that Plaster Creek today is the most contaminated waterway in West Michigan, posing a public health risk to the neighborhoods through which it flows.

Plaster Creek Stewards (PCS) seeks to create opportunities for all watershed members to join in the emerging story of a healthy, beautiful, renewed Plaster Creek. As an initiative of Calvin University, our strategy includes research, education, engagement, partnerships, and regenerative practices. One of the things PCS does is help watershed residents landscape their properties in creek-friendly ways. Creek-friendly yards are created by slowing down and soaking up the rush of stormwater runoff that flows off the land into our local creeks.

A key to this regenerative landscaping approach includes using Michigan native plants. Their deep roots absorb stormwater and filter nutrients, pollutants, and sediments while slowing the rush of runoff to the creek. The slow filtering process provides the creek with clean, cool, regular sources of water as compared to the warm, polluted storm surges that come from the storm sewers. Another benefit is the habitat they create for pollinators and birds, as well as the visual aesthetic of summer flowers, fall colors, and winter seeds.

Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI--projects that use plants and earth to manage stormwater rather than pipes to send it to the nearest waterway) is key to helping our waterways heal after 150 years of neglect and abuse. These projects vary from large floodplain restorations and bioswales to small rain gardens and simple introductions of native plants in our own yards. Besides GSI, there are everyday practices like picking up trash and dog waste for proper disposal, avoiding washing cars in the driveway where the water travels into storm drains, and even composting yard waste away from waterways to keep excess nutrients out of local streams.

Plaster Creek Stewards help individuals identify what steps they can take to create creek-friendly yards with native plants for filtering stormwater. PCS staff and summer research students provide consulting, site designs, installation, and maintenance for projects as capacity allows. PCS is a part of the Native Plant Guild, a network of native landscape experts who also provide wonderful services.

Consider what steps you could take to begin caring for your local waterway. When we all do our part, everyone can thrive together. For more information, visit Plaster Creek Stewards on their Website, Facebook, Instagram, or email them at plastercreekstewards@calvin.edu.