

THE LOVE-HATE STORY OF EUCALYPTUS

By Susan Cluff

There are hundreds of large eucalyptus trees all over the Tiburon Peninsula, many over 150 feet tall, their waxy green leaves, shaggy mottled bark and strong aromatic scent now part of our everyday landscape. Eucalyptus were first brought to California from Southern Australia by the "Sydney Ducks," confidence men and criminals who congregated on the Barbary Coast after the Gold Rush.

Touted as fast growing timber and shade trees for early San Francisco, eucalyptus were commonly known as "gum trees" from the sap that oozes out of tree wounds. Some of the earliest eucalyptus trees were planted in the 1870s at the Presidio, Golden Gate Park and University of California in Berkeley. In 1886, the military planted 20 acres of eucalyptus on then-treeless Angel Island.

But while the new trees grew high and fast, they had a tendency to fall over in high winds and produced only poor quality wood suitable for fence posts and poles. Still, another big selling scheme began in 1904 when the State Forester predicted that California would soon become the "home of hardwood manufacturing." Promoters bought up tracts of land for about \$15 an acre, set out seedlings that cost \$5 a thousand and sold the land for \$25 an acre, promising that within a decade the timber would be worth ten times that.

Soon rows and groves of eucalyptus covered local hillsides and filled up canyons and marshlands. The boom lasted for about eight years until someone discovered that the primary species being imported, the Tasmanian Blue Gum, was no good for timber even in Australia. While some trees produced honey, medicinal syrups, liniments and industrial solvents, the oil proved toxic if ingested or absorbed

in high doses. The trees' shallow, spreading roots grew into plumbing pipes, septic tanks and sewers and lifted up roadways and foundations. Cities like Sausalito soon prohibited eucalyptus plantings within 100 feet of sewer lines, water pipes, storm water ditches and public roadways.

From 1933-42, the Civilian Conservation Corps known as "Roosevelt's Tree Army" again planted thousands of eucalyptus all around Marin to provide windbreaks and prevent erosion, drought and flooding. These included large tree plantings where Trestle Glen Boulevard connects to Paradise Drive when the road was completed as a WPA project in 1937.

Today, many ecologists and naturalists consider eucalyptus to be an invasive species due to its ability to quickly spread via seeds and displace native plantings. Some fire departments think them a fire hazard. But advocates argue that the big trees sequester and store carbon, have created their own ecosystems for birds, butterflies, and small mammals, and in drought years, contribute to the seasonal water table by intercepting the summer fogs that roll in from the ocean which condenses on their leaves and drips to the ground like rainfall.

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1. Imported eucalyptus trees planted by the military in the 1880s on Angel Island at West Garrison (Camp Reynolds) in 1970.

2. In 1892, Belvedere Land Company planted over 2,000 trees on Belvedere Island including 500 "gum trees." Here are some at the golf club in 1924.

3. Eucalyptus were often planted as windbreaks like these at Little Reed Ranch Dairy (now Del Mar School) shown here in the 1940s.

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