

*CONSERVATION GUIDE  
FOR PORTOLA VALLEY RESIDENTS*



*Spring Ridge and Windy Hill. Photo by Susan Thomas*

Prepared by the Town of Portola Valley's Conservation Committee

Approved by the Portola Valley Town Council

May 2004



*Western Hills from Jasper Ridge. Photo by Bernadine McCall*

## *INTRODUCTION*

Since its incorporation in 1964, the Town of Portola Valley has recognized the unique beauty of its environment and has endeavored to protect our native plants, wildlife, waterways, and outstanding views. There are many things worth conserving in Portola Valley, from the elements of nature and the resources that we use, to the "feel" of our community. Under section 1010 of the Town's General Plan, major community goals include the following:

*"To preserve and enhance the natural features and open space of the planning area because they are unusual and valuable assets for the planning area, the Peninsula, and the entire Bay Area."*

*"To conserve the rural quality of Portola Valley and maintain the Town as an attractive, tranquil, family-oriented residential community for all generations, compatible with the many physical constraints and natural features of the area."*

Town Commissions, Committees, and staff play major roles in implementing these goals, using Town ordinances and procedures to shape the manner in which the Town is developed. Residents exert an equally strong influence on the Town. We are stewards and shareholders, and we tend to conserve most vigorously what we most value. The way we live and build, and how we use or abuse the natural gifts of Portola Valley, will determine whether or not these advantages of our Town endure.

The purpose of this Guide is to increase our consciousness of Portola Valley's precious natural resources, to highlight protective measures used by the Town government and staff, and to show every resident how he or she can contribute to preserving the rural environment that we all treasure. More information about any of these topics is available from Town's staff, web site, committees, and the General Plan.

## ***AMBIANCE***

*The ambiance of quiet, serenity, and natural beauty as part of one's daily life may be the Town's greatest asset. Residents and visitors alike depend on the open vistas, grassy hills, native vegetation, and starry night skies for the sense of well-being that they provide.*

## **SPACE**

Open space provides room and resources for plants, wildlife, and recreation. Low density development gives residents a feeling of privacy and connection with the land. Residents, as well as people living in higher-density areas along the Peninsula, benefit from having open space nearby.

### **What the Town Does:**

- Encourages and facilitates preservation of permanent open space areas such as Windy Hill and Coal Mine Ridge
- Funds Town purchases of open space through the Utility Users Tax and private donations raised by the Open Space Acquisition Committee, composed of Town residents
- Enacts and enforces zoning regulations consistent with open space goals, environmental, seismic, geologic, and other conditions
- Publishes Design Guidelines to encourage development consistent with the Town's open character and conservation objectives
- Builds and maintains a network of trails for hiking and equestrian use

## How You Can Help:

- Design site-appropriate structures subordinate to natural surroundings
- Landscape only near structures, leaving native vegetation on the remainder of site
- Minimize visually obvious barriers such as fences, gates, or walls
- Contribute to the Town's Open Space Acquisition Fund



*Photo of Portola Valley Ranch by Morley Baer, courtesy of Joe Whelan*

## VIEWS

Natural uncluttered view corridors benefit both residents and neighboring communities. Views help preserve our feeling that nature predominates over development. Visual open space can also be enjoyed by those Town residents who are not able to walk, hike, ride, or bike in our parks and preserves.

### **What the Town Does:**

- Enacts and enforces zoning limits such as setbacks, floor-area ratios, and building heights to preserve views and a sense of open space on individual properties
- Requires unique development plans for larger parcels of land to preserve the important natural conditions of the property
- Advises homeowners as to view-sensitive design through Design Guidelines
- Defines special building restrictions in areas of particular scenic interest, such as the Western Hills and the Portola Road and Alpine Road scenic corridors
- Mandates undergrounding of utility wires in newly developed areas

### **How You Can Help:**

- Keep building sizes in proportion to the natural site
- Avoid building on ridgelines; blend in with the environment
- Maintain natural land contours; avoid severe cutting, filling, and terracing
- Screen structures with appropriate landscaping

For more specific suggestions, please refer to the Design Guidelines published by the Town.



*Photo by Don Eckstrom*

## QUIET

Access to sounds of nature, such as flowing water, blowing wind, and the early morning bird chorus, provides a sense of refuge from the hustle and bustle of the nearby urban environment.

### What the Town Does:

- Enforces noise ordinances that define permissible times for construction and garden maintenance
- Works with Airport Community Roundtable to minimize aircraft noise

### How You Can Help:

- Inform contractors and gardeners about noise ordinances and require adherence to restrictions
- Be considerate of your neighbors when entertaining or using equipment outdoors
- Minimize noise in general; control pet noise



*Photo by Susan Thomas*

## NIGHT SKIES

Absence of artificial light at night enhances our view of the stars and preserves the rural feel and tranquility of our community. It is strange but true that one actually needs less light to see when ambient light is low.

### What the Town Does:

- Prohibits use of street lighting along Town roads
- Regulates level of lighting for outdoor use through ordinances and Architectural and Site Control Commission review

### How You Can Help:

- Use minimal outdoor lighting, maintained under manual control, not with motion sensors or timers
- Direct outdoor illumination toward the ground
- Avoid use of lights to accent outdoor architectural features



*Halley's Comet from Skyline Drive 1986.  
Photo by Don Eckstrom*

## ***NATURE***

*Some of Portola Valley's most obvious and valued assets are our natural features, our trees and plants, creeks and ponds, and creatures of the land, water and sky. The long-term health of these features is tightly intertwined with our own. Their protection provides us with well-being in the future as well as a wonderful place to live in the present.*

## **TREES**

Trees provide a sense of permanence, and we regard our trees as assets to be treasured. The tree canopy and the mixture of trees native to Portola Valley are major elements of the viewscape and define the Town character that we cherish. Trees provide shade, creating pleasant recreational spaces, providing energy efficiency in cooling systems, and serving as habitat for plants and wildlife. They add moisture to the air and soften the appearance of man-made structures, helping to maintain the rural quality of the Town.

### **What the Town Does:**

- Protects significant trees by means of the Site Development and Tree Protection Ordinance
- Helps preserve trees that are already part of our landscape by following a thorough design review process
- Advises and assists residents with tree planting and removal issues
- Protects and maintains trees on Town lands
- Trims trees periodically along major roads

### **How You Can Help:**

- Protect significant trees on your property
- Save smaller trees where possible to grow into larger, mature trees
- Consult an arborist before making landscaping or irrigation changes underneath trees

- Have trees checked periodically by an arborist to preserve their long-term health
- Use native species appropriate to the location when planting new trees, and consider replacing non-native species (see list in Design Guidelines)



*Coastal Redwood (Sequoia sempervirens)*  
*Drawing by Herb Dengler*

## PLANTS

Our Town has a rich heritage of varied native plants and groundcovers that have evolved in this climate and in these soils. Native plants provide habitat and food for local wildlife and require less water and maintenance. Non-native plants such as broom and thistle crowd out native plants, and their eradication is strongly recommended.

### **What the Town Does:**

- Emphasizes use of native plants in landscaping projects
- Reviews planting plans to protect native vegetation, particularly in riparian areas
- Provides information and tools for removal of invasive species such as broom and thistle
- Hosts community events to eradicate invasive plants on Town lands and along roadways

### **How You Can Help:**

- Learn what native plants grow best on your property; preserve native plants whenever possible
- Select your landscaping to suit your site
- Learn to identify invasive species and eradicate them on your property



*Hound's Tongue (Cynoglossum grande)*  
*Painting by Herb Dengler*

## CREEKS

Portola Valley is one of the few fortunate towns with resilient creeks carrying clear water between banks with mostly native riparian (streamside) vegetation. Many towns have restricted their creeks to concrete channels, or even piped them underground. Corte Madera and Sausal Creeks provide habitat for rainbow trout; Los Trancos Creek, which flows into San Francisquito Creek, affords passage for ocean-going steelhead migrating to their spawning ground. The high moisture environment around the creeks provides food, shelter, and a migration corridor for a greater variety of wildlife than any other habitat in Town.

### **What the Town Does:**

- Reviews permits under Town policies and local, state, and federal regulations before allowing streambed or bank alterations
- Encourages and supports best management practices when working near creeks
- Maintains Eagle Scout Trail along Corte Madera Creek at Alpine Road for Town residents to explore and enjoy

### **How You Can Help:**

- Prevent runoff of contaminants such as herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, and automotive wastes into creeks and ponds; all materials carried by storm drains enter our streams
- Control pet and livestock access to streams and riparian corridors; maintain vegetation and keep manure out of stream water
- Maintain septic systems by periodic pumping so that leachate does not reach streams
- Minimize impermeable surfaces on your property to reduce runoff into creeks
- Maintain and restore riparian habitat in accordance with Streamside Planting Guide



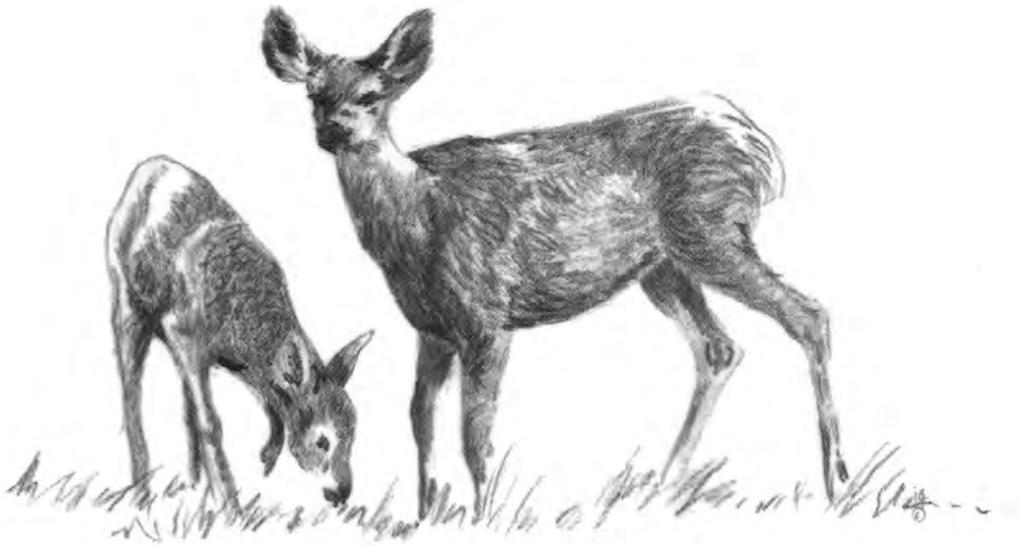
*Corte Madera Creek along Alpine Road west of Willowbrook  
Photo courtesy of Nancy Lund, from the Portola Valley archives*

## WILDLIFE

Portola Valley enjoys an abundance of native wildlife, such as deer, coyotes, foxes, blue herons, owls, frogs, invertebrates, and insects. Such diversity of fauna enhances the rural ambiance of the Town, and each species plays a role in maintaining a resilient ecosystem.

### What the Town Does:

- Encourages maintenance of wildlife corridors
- Encourages use of native plants that sustain native wildlife
- Monitors use of fencing and lighting that may disturb native species



*Deer*  
*Drawing by Jane Gallagher*

## How You Can Help:

- Use native plants that are more deer- and pest-resistant, reducing the need for fencing and pesticides
- Cluster buildings on your site
- Maintain open, unfenced areas for wildlife to inhabit and traverse
- Avoid use of pesticides and other toxins; always dispose of dangerous materials properly
- Feed pets indoors; do not feed wildlife
- Take pets only on allowed trails; bell your cat; leash your dog



*Mouse and mushrooms  
Drawing by Jane Gallagher*

## ***RESOURCES***

*We obtain, use up, and dispose of resources, such as air, water, energy and materials, in the course of our daily lives. The limits of these resources, the cost to obtain them, the difficulty of disposing of them, and the consequences of doing without them are not always obvious. We have an obligation to use them wisely.*

### AIR QUALITY

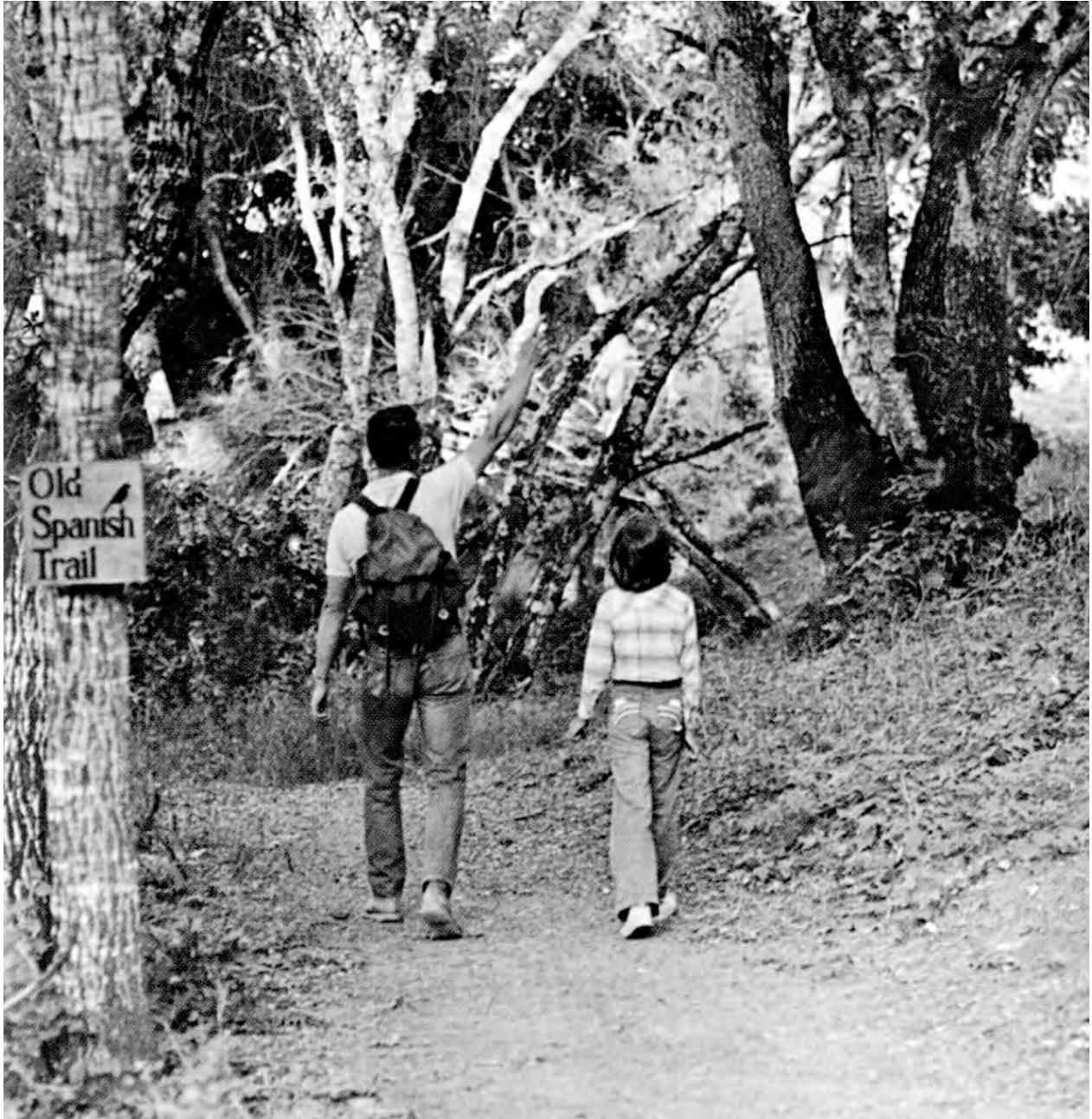
Portola Valley enjoys excellent air quality. We should minimize the toxins that we put in the air, to avoid causing health problems for ourselves and others downwind of our area. Dirty air obstructs views and harms people, plants and wildlife.

#### **What the Town Does:**

- Protects significant trees
- Prohibits burning waste
- Encourages walking, biking, hiking, and horseback riding by maintaining trails, paths, and bike routes

#### **How You Can Help:**

- Drive alternative fuel or low-emission vehicles; minimize length and number of daily vehicle trips
- Consider replacing wood-burning stoves and fireplaces with natural gas



*Photo courtesy of Nancy Lund, from the Portola Valley archives*

## WATER

Portola Valley enjoys a semi-arid Mediterranean climate subject to periodic drought cycles and possible water rationing. Conserving water will help us ensure an adequate supply now and in the future, and it will also save energy and protect our beautiful lakes and streams. It is wise to limit water use even in times when water appears to be in plentiful supply.

### What the Town Does:

- Requires committee review of landscaping plans, encourages use of native species, discourages large lawns
- Provides information about native plants in Design Guidelines

### How You Can Help:

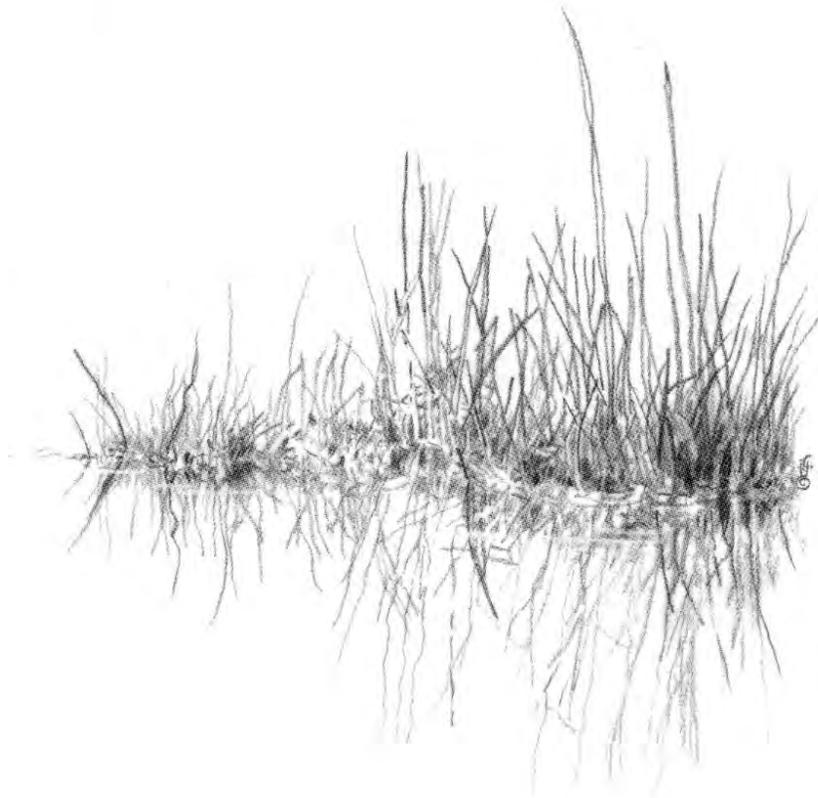
- Be conscious of water use and specify low-water-use fixtures and appliances
- Avoid large expanses of water-hungry landscaping and use drip irrigation wherever possible
- Use a pool cover to minimize evaporation and conserve energy and chemicals
- Mulch planted areas to reduce evaporation and suppress weed growth



*“The western landscape is more than topography and landforms, dirt and rock. It is, most fundamentally, climate--climate which expresses itself not only as landforms but as atmosphere, flora, fauna. And here, despite all local variety there is a large abiding simplicity. Not all the West is arid, yet except at its Pacific edge, aridity surrounds and encompasses it. . . Aridity more than anything else gives the western landscape its character. . . **the primary unity of the West is a shortage of water.**”*

*Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*

*Wallace Stegner*



*Reed Reflections*  
*Drawing by Jane Gallagher*  
*(Pages 20 and 21)*

## ENERGY

High energy consumption causes shortages and higher prices. Energy production and consumption generally contribute to pollution of air, land, and water.

### **What the Town Does:**

- Enforces state requirements for home energy efficiency in new homes and remodel projects
- Grants fee concessions for installation of solar energy systems

### **How You Can Help:**

- Design buildings for energy efficiency; manage heat and air conditioning (thermostat at 68-70 degrees in winter, 80 degrees in summer)
- Use passive energy management techniques such as special glass or window coverings
- Use energy-efficient appliances
- Minimize energy consumption during peak hours (3-7 p.m.)
- Install solar panels
- Reduce lighting outdoors and in unused rooms indoors
- Drive fuel-efficient vehicles; minimize length and number of daily trips
- Car pool, particularly to schools, sport events, and other gatherings
- Walk or bicycle to local destinations



*Fitzhugh windmill at the corner of Portola Road and Georgia Lane  
Photo by Susan Thomas*

## MATERIALS

We fuel our lives with products derived from natural materials such as metal ore, oil, and trees. It costs money and resources to make and transport objects that we use and to haul them away when they are no longer useful. Conservation of materials reduces the transformation of natural resources into landfill.

### **What the Town Does:**

- Chooses a waste contractor that recycles 80-90% of household waste
- Enforces Town ordinance requiring recycling of 60% of construction debris by contractors
- Holds periodic recycling events for large items or other special needs
- Provides information on sources of recycled materials

### **How You Can Help:**

- Buy only what you need; purchase items free of excessive packaging
- Use recycled materials when building or remodeling (see references)
- Make purchases with long useful life; donate unwanted items to non-profit organizations
- Register to be removed from junk-mail address lists
- Use county Household Hazardous Waste drop-off services
- Make recycling part of your daily trash disposal

For more specific suggestions, see the Additional References.



*Oxen pulling redwood logs from the western hills.  
Photo from the San Mateo County Historical Society*

## *CONCLUSION*

As residents, we were attracted to Portola Valley by its rural beauty. The continuity of grassland and native tree canopy on the Western slopes, the presence of free running streams with their native plants and animals which have evolved in mutual interdependence, and the night skies with visible constellations are treasures which we all enjoy.

The Town founders were convinced that local government could best protect and preserve the environment they valued. For the past forty years, many volunteers, aided by a small Town staff, have worked to maintain this tranquil community, but there is only so much that government can do. Town officials can enact regulations, but in the end individual choices that we, as residents, make will determine whether our local treasures are saved or lost. The Town looks to you to continue to protect, preserve, and enjoy the Portola Valley you love.



*Photo by Susan Thomas*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Prepared by the Portola Valley Conservation Committee 2003:  
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*Searsville Lake. Painting by Jane Gallagher*

## ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

### Materials available at Town Center:

- Design Guidelines, Town of Portola Valley, July 1989.
- Town of Portola Valley General Plan
- San Mateo Countywide Guide Sustainable Buildings. A publication of the County of San Mateo (February 2004)
- Streamside Planting Guide for San Mateo and Santa Clara County Streams. Publication of the San Francisco Creek Watershed Coordinated Resource Management and Planning Process. (Oct. 2003).
- "Invasive Plants of California's Wildlands" edited by Carla C. Bossard, John M. Randall, and Marc C. Hasbovsky, UC Press (2000) ISBN 0-520-22547-3.

### Materials available at Town Library:

- "Invasive Plants of California's Wildlands," edited by Carla C. Bossard, John M. Randall, and Marc C. Hasbovsky, UC Press (2000) ISBN 0-520-22547-3.
- Lund, Nancy, and Pamela Gullard, Life on the San Andreas Fault: A History of Portola Valley, Scottwall Associates (San Francisco, 2003).
- Lowry, Judith Larner, Gardening with a Wild Heart: Restoring California's Landscapes at Home, UC Press (1999).

### Other sources:

- The town's web site, [www.PortolaValley.net](http://www.PortolaValley.net), provides access to the Design Guidelines, trail maps, and other town resources.
- <http://www.RecycleWorks.org> is a very thorough treatment of recycling, recycled materials, and sustainable building maintained by the County of San Mateo.
- For junk mail reduction, contact: Direct Marketing Association, Box 643, Carmel, NY 10512, phone 212-768-7277.

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