

Pasadena Water and Power Demonstrates the Benefits of Hügelkultur to Save Water

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Pasadena Water and Power is demonstrating a centuries-old, European horticultural technique that uses a raised mound of compostable material as a bed for plantings to show Pasadenans a method for using a nature-based technology to build healthy soil in order to save water in their landscapes.

The practice is called Hügelkultur— German for “hill culture” – and is said to reduce or eliminate irrigation in municipal landscape settings, while helping build up healthy, fertile soil on and around the mound, or “hugel.”

PWP has received a grant of \$86,000 from the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to build hugels at several sites in Pasadena and to educate residents on how to use such a nature-based technology to build healthy soil and save water in their landscapes.

This grant is usually awarded for traditional water efficient technologies such as drip irrigation, or water sensors. In applying for the grant, PWP proposed that Hügelkultur should be considered a technology for its ability to retain significant amounts of moisture and minimize landscape water use.

The proposal was eventually approved for exploration. Along with creating hugels across Pasadena, the project includes a rigorous data collection and analysis component, and a community outreach component as well to disseminate findings and encourage wide-spread adoption of the technique as a “best practice.”

PWP describes Hügelkultur as a no-dig technique where decaying wood debris and other compostable biomass are laid out in a raised and mounded bed in which plants, trees, and shrubs can be planted. Hügelkultur needs whole trunk wood as a base to be successful because tree trunks decompose slowly and steadily, like they do naturally in forests.

The technology in fact mimics natural woodland processes where woody debris and other biomass falls to the forest floor, becoming sponge-like, soaking up rainfall and slowly releasing it into the surrounding soil, making the moisture available to surrounding flora.

PWP has already completed two hugels at the Sheldon Reservoir Landscape, at the corner of Coniston Road and Arroyo Blvd. The next site for hugels will be in the Arroyo Seco, adjacent to the Gabrielino Trail, and at the northern end of the Sierra Madre median.

For the community awareness component, PWP partnered with the Planning and Community Development Department’s Cultural Affairs division to produce an environmental art project with public messaging about hugels. The artwork, by artist Bia Gayotto, is now seen on Pasadena Transit buses as a part of a public campaign that started in May.

Bia Gayotto has a background in marine ecology and her art investigates humans and their environment. She observed and photographed decaying redwood tree stumps, with the photos portraying how these stumps are really not dead but alive, and continue to nurture the forest and animal life.

Residents will be able to learn how to build a hugel at workshops the PWP has scheduled in the Fall of 2021. For more information, visit www.PWPweb.com/hugel.