Help bluffs to help themselves

Lately it seems that the rains will never stop. The grounds are soggy everywhere and winds and occasional freezing cold add to the problems. Bluffs are in trouble in many areas around the Pacific Northwest and the Camano Island / Stanwood area is not an exemption.

Unfortunately once a bluff becomes unstable and starts to erode very little can be done to save it. That is why prevention is a key to bluff management. Bluffs are regulated when it comes to alterations and/or constructions through the county offices.

The simplest technique to improve the condition of a bluff is through planting. Bluff properties have great views and people generally try to avoid placing anything there that could interfere with the priceless treasure. Plants can however not only help stabilizing the site, but also enhance the view further.

Most of the time bluffs have trees that are topped either by winds or on purpose, some blackberry infested native vegetation trimmed low and lawns. This arrangement is one of the reasons why bluffs are failing so often. Lawns have shallow root systems and form a blanket on top of the soil underneath the lawn. This blanket acts like a real sheet does when stressed: slides off the base layer. Lawns in heavy rains repel most of the water which than erodes the bluff. Topped trees, especially if regularly topped are stressed and therefore weakened. Their root system does not function as a healthy tree's roots do so these trees are limited in their role as anchors of the bluff. Blackberries are relatively shallow rooted, they choke out anything else around them and they form a monoculture. Monocultures are just like lawns since they also from a blanket layer on soils and they are prone to slides. The native vegetation if pruned to stay at extremely low heights is stressed and often diseased thus cannot provide good erosion control.

When a bluff is planted the best is to design the root system first. Plants will have to be placed strategically so deep rooting, medium rooting, and shallow rooting plants are all mixed well and form a deeply penetrating grid system in the soil. Once we know what kinds of roots we need and how many in what area, we can pick the plants that match the requirement and can tolerate the site conditions well (wet/dry/sunny/shady/etc.).It is best to leave the soil on the bluff as undisturbed as possible. There are many different techniques used today which allow for planting without even digging into the ground much. One of the simplest is to plant over lawns by covering the grass with many layers of newspaper or cardboard, piling good, aged compost on it, plant the plants into the compost - cut through the paper if need be, lay a basic drip-line among the plants with a timer on it, cover the new bed with mulch, and water the plants in the first season during the dry summer months twice a week.

Pick plants that will compliment the view without the need for pruning regularly. Sometimes we have to readjust our expectations of what a perfect view is. Tall plants can serve as frames and focal points directing our attention to the very view. Native plants will always be the best fit for any landscaping project. These trees, shrubs, groundcovers and perennials are disease resistant, they tolerate the climate and our environment the best, they require very little maintenance while supporting wildlife, and they also look spectacular given the chance to fulfill their potentials.

May be some of us grows tired of hearing "prevention prevention prevention" in almost every area of our life from the doctors' offices to the landscape professionals but it is perhaps the greatest discovery humankind made in the most recent times: prevention is more effective as a solution on the long run than any emergency response will ever be.

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