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Actress Darryl Hannah helps plant a cork oak tree in the UC Davis Arboretum on Friday. She was there to promote the use of cork.

Among UCD's oaks, actress Hannah sings cork's praises

By Cory Golden
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The UC Davis Arboretum is home to 590 oak trees representing 100 varieties.

"Five hundred ninety-one," actress Daryl Hannah said on Friday morning, after helping two staff members plant one more.

The star of such films as "Splash" and "Roxanne," "Blade Runner" and the "Kill Bill" saga, arrived at UCD at 2 a.m. In all, she spent five hours in a stand of sprawling oaks, answering via satellite questions from

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Top left and right: Actress Darryl Hannah helps plant a cork oak tree in the UC Davis Arboretum on Friday. She was there to promote the use of cork. Right center and bottom: UC Davis Arboretum Director Kathleen Socolofsky, at left, and actress Daryl Hannah walk through the Native American Contemplative Garden in the Arboretum.

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television and radio reporters around the country about her latest environmental cause: cork.

Hannah was promoting 100 Percent Cork, a campaign pushing its use over synthetic and aluminum screwtops for wine. To harvest cork, a hand ax is used to remove the cork oak tree's outer bark without harming the tree.

The organization counts as a member the Portuguese Cork Association, a trade group. It touts cork as a biodegradable and recyclable alternative taken from 6.7 million acres of Western Mediterranean woodlands, which both sequester carbon and are home to more than 13,000 plant species and scores of animals.

Hannah said she hoped to impress upon people "how amazing cork is and to encourage people not to let if fall by the wayside for false solutions."

"Cork is actually one of the real solutions, sustainable solutions, that we have, not just for wine closures but so many different things," she said. "People get tricked really easily into false solutions because there are a lot of marketing dollars that push them in that general direction.

"So (I'm doing it) in order to preserve these ecosystems and forests, to bring awareness to all the wonderful potential cork has."

All three kinds of wine stoppers are recyclable, if not always easily. The organization ReCork promotes recycling of natural cork into flooring, shoes and other items by accepting wine corks directly from consumers by mail or drop-off locations.

Andrew Waterhouse, chair of the UCD department of viticulture and enology, said the musty odor of cork taint opened the door to alternative stoppers (cork

producers refer instead to "wine taint," noting it can be caused by factors besides their product).

According to one survey, natural cork wine stopper sales dropped 18 percent between 2000 and 2005. By 2005, better than one in three bottles in Australia was sold with a synthetic stopper or screwtop.

Waterhouse said cork producers have responded by improving their own product.

Indeed, cork producers often cite a 1999 study often by independent researchers at ETA Laboratories in St. Helena that estimated rates of cork taint had fallen to between 1 and 2 percent, compared to double-digit figures in the 1970s and '80s.

While the wine industry has been quicker than most to green its image, Waterhouse said quality remains its chief concern.

"Closures are a minor part of the carbon footprint (of the wine industry)," he said. "I haven't heard of anyone being swayed by any of those arguments about which is greener, and I suspect most consumers are concerned most with quality and image. And the problem of image (for synthetic stoppers and screwtops) is rapidly going away with younger consumers."

Waterhouse said each type of stopper can serve well with particular types of wines because of how much oxygen is transferred through each. Cork has been the standard for wines meant to be aged, he said, but producers are readying new synthetic stoppers and screwtops they claim better approximate oxygen transfer through cork closures.

Hannah said she felt the industry would respond to public pressure by wine consumers to stay with, or return to, cork.

"Strangely enough a lot of the organic wines and even



SUE COCKRELL/ENTERPRISE PHOTO

Actress Daryl Hannah gets a closer look at the leaves of a cork oak tree that she planted in the UC Davis Arboretum on Friday, accompanied by Arboretum Director Kathleen Socolofsky, at right.

biodynamic wines started going toward aluminum and plastic because they were convinced somehow that it was more sustainable," she said. "When you look at the full life cycle, it makes no sense. I think there will be a market movement back to cork. It makes so much more sense — and it's so much nicer."

Hannah said she became interested in cork "sort of by accident."

Last year, she traveled to Portugal for a conference on sustainability to speak alongside activist Robert Kennedy Jr., and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change scientists.

"I was like, 'Ooh, can I see the cork forests?' So I got to see that and met a guy who processes the cork and I got to go watch that process," she said. "(They) saw my eyes light up and were like, 'Would you be interested in helping them get the word out?' I'm like, 'Yeahhh, sure.' I just think it's such a no-brainer, such a cool and great thing."

Many of the two dozen or so reporters Hannah spoke with on Friday didn't know how cork was harvested.

That's OK, Hannah said — she didn't, either, before her trip.

"I thought, 'They must have to cut down the trees

and it's got to be horrible and the cork is probably the heart of the tree' — I had no idea. That's why when I went to Portugal and I saw these forests and all these creatures living there that this was a story that needed to be told."

The San Francisco office of Sitrick and Company, a public relations firm, selected UCD's arboretum as the setting for Hannah's interviews based on a number of cork oaks on campus, which were planted as a trial during a World War II.

Though playing host to the interviews, the arboretum wasn't picking sides in the wine closure debate, director Kathleen Socolofsky said.

The staff did ask if Hannah would plant a tree for a video promoting its place of significance in the national oak collection through the North American Plant Collections Consortium, however.

Hannah seemed happy to do so. She moved dirt around its thin trunk with her hands, then stood up and, smiling, kissed a leaf.

Online: <http://100percentcork.org>, <http://arboretum.ucdavis.edu>

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