

New CEO Brings 20 Years of Experience
Botanical Garden Chief Prepares For Summer Opening
By Kathaleen Roberts

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Stopped at the chain link gates barring the entrance to the Santa Fe Botanical Garden, Clayton Bass scoured his smartphone for a number.

When an employee from his office in the Stuart Udall Museum Resource Center returned his call, he fished through his pocket to remove a set of keys. Presto.

“This is my third day on the job,” Bass said sheepishly.

Named the garden’s chief executive officer, Bass brings 20 years of experience in the nonprofit museum sector, specializing in development and management. He worked for the renowned Alexander Haas Fundraising Consultants of Atlanta. The company played a major role in the New Mexico History Museum campaign. Bass was also president, CEO and capital campaign director of Alabama’s Huntsville Museum of Art, where he led a \$10 million expansion campaign. He also has helmed arts institutions in Ocean Springs, Miss., and at Atlanta’s Emory Museum.

In true Santa Fe style, Bass is also a painter and a sculptor.

“I love plants and I’m also an avid hiker,” he explained from his Museum Hill office. “This is an interesting way to blend all my interests.”

The 13-acre site is slated to open to visitors July 19-21. Its rolling slopes climb and dip beneath the shadows of the Sangre de Cristo foothills. Now home to piñon, juniper and sun-baked chamisa, the garden also reveals more recent plantings of stone walkways, arbors and bancos.

“We want the garden to be a place where people experience nature,” Bass said.

“All of the garden is very much about education for all ages,” he continued. The nonprofit organization’s next hire will be an education director, he added.

Dip down a small slope and you’ll see the red flash of the nearly 100-year-old Kearny’s Gap Bridge from San Miguel County crossing the 60-foot-wide Arroyo de los Pinos. Originally built in 1913 along N.M. 283, the bridge will now connect the site’s Courtyard Gardens and Naturalistic Gardens, the latter featuring a xeric lawn and spaces for children’s classes. A Civilian Conservation Corps rock structure dating to the 1930s remains underneath the bridge as a storm dam to control the arroyo water.

“It’s a great way to teach people about the efforts to control erosion during that period,” Bass explained.

He led visitors up and down the stone-and-gravel covered trails to what will become the centerpiece Orchard Garden, planted across 1.69 acres with peach, pear, apricot, cherry and apple trees. Beyond it and across the bridge is the Naturalistic Garden, so named for its emphasis on native plants and those crucial to pueblo culture and the northern New Mexican tradition of dyeing and weaving. The Meadow Garden is anchored by a trio of granite sculptures called “Emergence” by Taos artist Candyce Garrett.

“Clearly it refers to the natural things happening here,” Bass said. “It’s seed-like or pod-like.

“We want the garden to be a place where people experience nature as well as fine art,” he added.

The summer opening is the culmination of about eight years of planning. Individual memberships have doubled, business partnerships have tripled and a Legacy Society for planned giving has been formed. So far, gifts and donations have surpassed \$2.3 million, Bass said. The total cost is projected to be around \$7.5 million.

“We’re optimistic,” he said. “We feel the project has a lot of momentum.”

People often ask Bass if the area will spout “lots of fountains.” But this is New Mexico. A single fountain will trickle near a Calvary-like site of vertical rusted steel pipes bent like so many twigs. Their metal branches will hold and knit a trumpet-vine arbor.

People no longer expect to see a manicured garden modeled on traditional English cottage or formal French style, Bass said.

“It becomes a site or a place for discussion or conversation,” he said.

Eventually, roses will climb and bloom along a lavender-laced walkway. The Meadow Garden will nurture blue flax, hummingbird mints, penstemon, thyme, veronica, hens and chicks, sedum, squills and tulips. Perennial borders will showcase coneflowers, yarrow, blanketflower, purple geranium, oregano, rosemary and sage. A xeric garden will hug oaks, claret cup, prickly pear, agave and yucca.

The Arroyo Trails, eight acres of biking and hiking trails, will open later this year. Construction of the Naturalistic and Courtyard Gardens will begin in 2014. Native plants will mix with non-native throughout to demonstrate the variety and richness that can be designed in thirsty New Mexico.

Planting begins with the trees and shrubs in March, depending on the weather.



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Grapes will be planted to grow on this ramada in the new Santa Fe Botanical Garden.



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Clayton Bass is the new CEO of the Santa Fe Botanical Garden. Behind him is the Kearny's Gap Bridge, spanning the Arroyo de Los Pinos in the garden under construction on Museum Hill.



This arbor will support trumpet vines in the new Santa Fe Botanical Garden under construction on Museum Hill.



This sign shows the layout and plantings for the Orchard Gardens, part of the Santa Fe Botanical Garden on Museum Hill.