

Museum Hill gardens begin to take shape as summer opening nears

By Julie Ann Grimm

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A few months from now, there will be a new reason to visit Museum Hill.

The grand opening for the Santa Fe Botanical Garden at Museum Hill is planned in late July as a three-day community celebration. It's been about six years since the nonprofit organization first leased land from the city and the state for the project.

Until now, the group has mostly concentrated on educational programs at a wetland preserve near La Cienega and an educational preserve in the Ortiz Mountains. Now, progress on the new facility is beginning to attract attention.

"It's coming along," said Managing Director Linda Milbourn during a sneak preview Monday.

Dozens of trees and shrubs that are expected to thrive in Santa Fe's climate were planted a month ago on the 2 acres that comprise the first phase of garden development on Camino Lejo. Already, colorful blooms are attracting bees to crab apple trees, and peach, apricot, cherry and other fruit-bearers have been planted in a careful grid in a small orchard. Ponderosa pines and a trio of oak trees line a pathway where more than 80 rose bushes and a bed of 170 lavender plants in five varieties will be planted this week. A vast collection of perennials and ground cover will follow, plus high-desert xeric plants, cactuses and succulents that will go in a section called "the dry garden."

Some plants will be familiar to the Northern New Mexico landscape, others eye-catching for their rarity.

"We're hoping that through some introduction of plants that are not so common here but are very well adapted, we can open people's eyes to plants they might now be aware of that might be used in gardens," Milbourn said.

For example, a single specimen of a golden rain tree stands near the front entrance where visitors can gaze at its dangling yellow flowers (expected to appear in late summer) and listen to the soft trickle of water in a not-yet-installed recirculating fountain.

The garden can't just be a scientific odyssey, Milbourn said. It's intended to "be a fantastically beautiful experience."

"The importance of plants to the quality of our life can't be overrated. It's our job," Milbourn said. "The botanical garden's mission is education, so everything we do has to be planned to be something people can enjoy and also learn from."

The gardens were master planned by landscape designer W. Gary Smith, known for his leadership in public gardens such as the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center in Austin, Texas; Longwood Gardens in eastern Pennsylvania; the Naples Botanical Garden in Florida; and the Brooklyn Botanical Garden and Bryant Park in his New York City home.

"One of the things I love about doing botanical gardens in different parts of the country are the different ecosystems you work with and the different cultures," he said in a telephone interview Monday. "In Santa Fe, this combination of a unique ecosystem and a rich and diverse human culture is just about as good as you can get."

Smith said he has enjoyed working with local stonemason John Morris as well as architect Beverly Spears and horticulturists Tracy Neal and Linda Churchill, to name a few of his on-the-ground associates in Santa Fe with local expertise in materials and plants.

Ground was broken on the initial garden construction late in 2011. Among architectural features is a 1913 steel highway bridge that was moved from its original site in San Miguel County and painted red.

Over the next five years, the garden expects to continue to expand into its 14 acres, with each project a little more extensive — and expensive — than the last. The next phase to open includes a planned ethnobotanical exhibit that showcases the relationship between mankind and plant life. The city has already installed part of a bicycle trail that will eventually link the gardens to Old Santa Fe Trail.

Planners took special pains to design the gardens to harvest as much rainwater as possible and to channel stormwater from large rain events into slow paths and ponds where soil infiltration can happen in due time.

Like every other new development hooked into Santa Fe's city water system, the botanical garden first had to transfer water rights to the city. In the first year, while plants are getting established, the gardens' drip irrigation system will use about two-thirds an acre-foot of water, or about 217,000 gallons. After that, water use should level off at half an acre-foot per year, or about 162,000 gallons per year. Even better water efficiency could also be realized if tentative partnerships with the state pan out, including a pending renovation at Milner Plaza. The area between the Museum of International Folk Art and the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian has drainage issues and needs to be regraded, Milbourn said, making installation of a water-harvesting system there a timely improvement.

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