

Memorial Garden Established

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The Grafton County Beautification Garden Project took another major step forward at the beginning of this month with the construction of a memorial garden. The project began in 2005 with a request from the Commissioners to the Grafton County Master Gardeners, a dedicated group of UNH Cooperative Extension volunteers, working with Jim Oakes, Grafton County Maintenance Supervisor, and Eileen Bolander, Grafton County Nursing Home Administrator, to create an attractive outdoor environment for relaxation and education on what had been a large open lawn space between the courthouse and the nursing home.

The initial vision was a series of low maintenance garden beds that could be inexpensively cared for by the Master Gardeners and the County Maintenance Department. The project also aimed to provide educational opportunities and a welcoming fresh air space for nursing home residents to entertain visitors surrounded by beautiful plants and buffered from the noise of the traffic on Route 10.

Over the years the Master Gardeners solicited funding and plant donations from a Mooseplate Grant, the NH Master Gardener Association, JM Landscaping, Bud's and Blooms, the County Farm, the UNH Agricultural Research Program, and garden enthusiasts from all over the County.

Even with the improvements that have been added every year, the low maintenance goal has been attained. Amazingly, this beautiful space requires only two annual work days for the Master Gardeners and mulch purchases as well as needed watering and mowing from the Maintenance Department. As for the other goals, I commonly see nursing home residents enjoying the sensory garden with their families and guests, and the gazebo has proven to be the perfect location for summer gardening workshops.

The first step, back in 2006, was to create three raised garden beds with multistoried plants near the road and a sensory garden around the gazebo. The roadside beds include primarily perennial plants and shrubs and spring flowering bulbs, while the sensory garden is wheelchair accessible and includes plants that appeal to all 5 senses. For example there are chives to taste, lilacs to smell, a wind chime to hear, soft lambs ears to touch, and bright bubble gum colored petunias to see. Over the years the line-up of plants has changed slightly as the on-going process of finding out which plants do best in the microclimate of the site plays itself out.

In 2007, stage two came into being with the establishment of the birch garden. The plan with this part of the space is to serve as an example of a sustainable and low maintenance landscape of primarily native plants that will be inexpensive, beautiful and show off what is possible in our climate. As the name hints, the crowning plants in this garden are the clumps of yellow and 'Heritage' river birch trees, but a splash of added interest comes from annual flowers that are donated each year from area nurseries. As Master Gardener Joan Pushee says "The job of a plant is to produce seeds and for most native NH plants this means they flower for only about 3 weeks so they have time for the seed to ripen". To get diversity in plant height, texture, and flower size and color the simplest approach is to populate the garden with low maintenance perennials, and then add different splashes of color and variety ever year with a new batch of flowering annuals.

After 2007 the focus switched to maintenance, education and tweaking. Wind has proven to be a challenge in the sensory garden, damaging quite a few plants, and several viburnum plants had to be replaced with different species after the original plants were attacked by viburnum leaf beetles. As construction plans for the new prison facility were completed project participants decided that plans for the final garden, a memorial garden, should be delayed and re-designed to better fit with the changing appearance of the site. Several trees that were deemed too close to an access road were removed during construction and that opened up room for a large boomerang shaped garden bed to be constructed just south of the gazebo.

Thus, step three, the memorial garden, was constructed by the GC Maintenance staff and planted at the beginning of this month by the Master Gardeners. Master Gardener Shirley Yorks donated many plants in memory of her husband. Other plant donors include Dick Flanders and Bonnie Ribberdy. The Master Gardeners invite people who would like to make a donation in memory of their loved one to contribute to the upkeep of this bed and to the eventual completion of the final step in the vision for the overall space. Currently, a paved path allows wheelchair access across a footbridge and into the gazebo and the sensory garden that surrounds it. Eventually, the plan is to expand this paved path into a loop that will allow access to more of the gardens as well as add some benches for sitting and enjoying.

This project started with a challenge from the Commissioners to the Master Gardeners to design a community garden space, and it has since grown into an impressive example of a sustainable landscape that showcases NH native plants and the work of volunteers. We hope you will come visit this space and experience it!

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