

Sacramento gardeners hone horticulture skills at innovative UC site



By John Stumbos, Sr. Public Information Representative, UC DANR

A not-so-secret community garden in the suburbs of Sacramento is blossoming into a regional center that attracts home gardeners from Modesto to Chico and the Bay Area to the Sierra Nevada.

The Fair Oaks Horticulture Center is a two-acre plot tucked away in the back corner of a public park that local Master Gardeners and a county horticulture advisor with the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) are rightfully proud of. It has evolved from a public service project 20 years ago into a showcase of horticultural innovation, residential landscape design and water conservation techniques.

Recently, UCCE Horticulture Advisor Chuck Ingels and a small team of UC-trained Master Gardeners were putting the finishing touches on the center's new water-efficient landscape gardens, which will be formally dedicated at a community celebration May 31.

Ingels has been a UCCE farm and horticulture advisor in Sacramento County since 1996 and was soon introduced to a local community garden by UCCE Master Gardeners. "I was asked to give a talk on pruning fruit trees during harvest day," he recalls. "It was fun. People liked it and I enjoy teaching horticulture."

Ingels was hooked and, not coincidentally, the horticulture center was established two years later adjacent to the community garden with the help of seven UCCE Master Gardeners. He has been instrumental in obtaining grants to expand the horticultural teaching facility from a number of sources, most importantly the state Department of Water Resources, the County of Sacramento and UC's own Elvenia J. Slosson Endowment Fund, managed by the UC Davis Department of Environmental Horticulture. Other important partners include the Fair Oaks Recreation and Park District; the Fair Oaks Water District; local landscape architects, designers and contractors; wholesale and retail nurseries; and irrigation professionals. And the number of dedicated Master Gardeners who maintain the center and lead workshops has increased to 35.

The horticulture center would not be possible without the enthusiastic dedication of Master Gardeners like Elizabeth Wise, who moved to the area from New Orleans in 1999. Wise oversees the table grape area. "There's tremendous interest from homeowners in grapes," she says. "The biggest thing we tell people is you have to prune them. You have to be the boss. You can't kill these things!"

Recent additions to the center include a vegetable trial area, an herb garden, a table grape vineyard and a berry variety block. Surprisingly, a number of newer blueberry varieties such as Reveille, Cape Fear and Ozark Blue will grow quite well in the Sacramento area. One of the newest features is a wood arbor that will provide shade for up to 50 people during summer talks. Wise provided a substantial donation for construction of the arbor.

Evidence of horticultural experimentation is not hard to find in the demonstration orchard that UCCE advisor Ingels has shepherded along the last five years. Consider the three-sided "pluot" ladder tree. Lateral branches have been trained to graft onto each other's trunks so that in a few years when the branches thicken, volunteers can just shimmy up the tree to pick the smooth-skinned fruit, which is a hybrid of plum and apricot. In another part of the orchard, apple trees are being trained to grow into a chair, not reclining but invitingly comfortable nonetheless. In another area, fanfare for the common Asian pear tree is taking shape as Olympic rings. And a "fruit salad" tree will soon boast different varieties of peaches, plums, apricots and almonds.

The design of the brand new landscape is largely the work of a local landscape architecture firm and Candace Schuncke, a Master Gardener and landscape designer. It is divided into four separate backyard landscapes and three additional demonstration areas. Each of the major landscapes represents typical residential yards and displays different designs and plant themes. After the dedication, the facility will be open to the public seven days a week and interpretive signs will guide visitors along a winding decomposed granite trail.

The dominant theme through these demonstration areas is water conservation. Schuncke says designers such as herself are increasingly interested in "green" landscapes that are more environmentally sustainable and water conservation is an integral component of that approach. According to the California Department of Water Resources, water-conserving landscapes use at least 40 percent less water than traditional landscaping.

"It's smart to use plants that are drought-hardy," Schuncke says.

A prominent feature of the water-efficient landscape is the Mediterranean Climate Garden, which will not have a lawn and instead rely on a heavy dose of drought-tolerant perennials like Echinacea, zephyr lily and ornamental grasses in a courtyard setting. The common variety garden area is intended to showcase easily obtainable, water thrifty plants such as blue fescue and Indian Hawthorne. A California native area will boast manzanita, sulfur buckwheat, ceanothus and other drought-adapted natives. The fourth area, to be installed later, will be an Asian-style meditation garden, where visitors can take a reflective pause and gaze out over the other areas of the Center.

Each of the backyard landscapes will demonstrate the fundamentals of a water-efficient landscape, including planning and design, soil and drainage improvements, efficient irrigation, low water-use plants, mulching and appropriate maintenance, Ingels notes. "In addition, the edible theme of the horticulture center will continue in the demonstration landscape with the incorporation of water-efficient fruit trees, herbs and other edible plants throughout the various 'back yards.'"

The highlight of the summer season is Harvest Day, held each year on the first Saturday in August. Last year more than 700 people turned out to sample a sumptuous spread of grapes, tree fruit and specialty vegetables, as well as to learn the latest horticultural techniques from Sacramento County's crack team of Master Gardeners.

But the center isn't limited to home gardeners. Small-scale specialty crop and organic growers who cater to the area's abundant farmers markets and upscale Sacramento-area restaurants have tapped into the resources of the Fair Oaks Horticulture Center. Landscape professionals and local water districts will be involved in workshops to help spread the water-efficient landscape philosophy.

The Fair Oaks Horticulture Center has come a long way since it began as a community garden in 1981. Fresh out of Master Gardener training, Phil Damewood envisioned a community garden in an area once slated for a parking lot. "This is what I always dreamed about," he said. "Hands-on activities are the way to learn horticulture, but I never thought it would turn out this nice."



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