

PLAZA VERDE NATIVE PLANT GARDEN COVID PANDEMIC

I am so very thankful for the Audubon Society and the opportunity through them that has ended up being such a blessing for me.

Before the Covid pandemic began, the local Audubon Society had reached out to the Colorado Master Gardeners in Pueblo for assistance in a native plant garden in association with a grant they had received. I responded along with several other master gardeners. With the onset of covid, the plans were put on hold. In the summer of 2020, we were able to meet with the City of Pueblo to select a possible site. By this time, due to covid, all the other master gardeners that had expressed interest in the project were no longer able to participate. We had initially looked at a couple sites along the Fountain Creek but finally settled on Plaza Verde along the levee.

The Plaza Verde Park has a unique little-known history. The area, located in the lower east side, close to the confluence of the Fountain Creek and the Arkansas River, had been inundated by the June 1965 flood which devastated the neighborhood and destroyed homes. This was also an area where there was no safe place for children to play. There were no playgrounds or even sidewalks for children. They could only play in the streets. After a couple of children had been killed, a group of mothers approached the city and as a result, the Plaza Verde Park was created in the area where homes had been destroyed by the flood.

A levee was also built from East 8th Street to the confluence of the Fountain and Arkansas to help prevent future floods. It is this area at the top of the park on the levee and along the river trail next to the Fountain Creek where 3 sites had also been created by the city that were available for use to put in a native plant garden.

In July of 2020, I was finally able to start work on the designated areas. This involved measuring the available area, soil testing, working with the city for irrigation, designing, weeding, clearing out the areas and researching to find nurseries with native plants. Unfortunately, due to covid, several local nurseries who used to carry native plants had closed. I was able to purchase a few native plants at Fox's nursery in Pueblo and ultimately discovered Brady's Nursery in Canon City which had a wealth of natives that I ended up using for the majority of the plants purchased.

The 2 main issues were the weeds and the poor soil which I discovered wasn't native but had been built up for the levee and was mainly clay and rock with several inches of pea gravel on top. The area had been untended for a period of time and was severely overgrown with a multitude of different weeds including the sticker weeds for which the area is known. It took many long hot hours to clear even a small area of dirt to ready for planting. Thanks to Brady's, I also began to use cotton burr to help break down all the clay. I also had to remove rocks of all sizes. Meanwhile, the city had laid new drip lines for irrigation and that helped in pulling all the weeds.

As I was starting to work out in Plaza Verde on a daily basis, the rest of the city was shutting down due to the covid restrictions. Friends and family were having to stay at home for the most part and unable to even go out to eat. But every day I was able to leave home and had meaningful work to do. Because I was working alone and outside, I could continue the work and did not even have to mask.

The city park caretakers were also very helpful and gave me permission to drive up to the top of the levee so that I didn't have to carry supplies all the way through the park. People began to start walking up to see what I was doing. As some outdoor activity was permitted, there were also people riding bikes who went by and watched the progress take place on the garden. Every day, they would holler out compliments and encouragement: "thank you; great job, looks good, thank you for all your hard work; pretty flowers; thanks for making it look so beautiful, we appreciate you, it's gorgeous, thanks for beautifying, looks great, awesome job, thanks for doing this, keep up the good work, thanks for what you do, thank you for making it pretty". Even the homeless would stop by and watch me work. They even gave me the name of "flower lady". The Park Rangers also stopped to see what I was doing and when they found out that I was putting in a native plant garden for a grant the Audubon Society had received, they came by every day to check on me and make sure I was ok. They even gave me phone numbers to call in case of an emergency.

In order to determine which native plants would work best along the Fountain Creek, I started doing additional research. I also talked to the staff at Brady's who are well-informed. I explained the project to them and they showed me which plants they had that they felt would work best in the location. They were such a wonderful help that I continue to recommend them to other gardeners. The drive out to Canon also ended up being a blessing as for the most part it wasn't possible to go anywhere or do anything with the covid restrictions. I always enjoyed the drive to Canon and visiting with expert gardeners then selecting plants.

The process to put in every plant involved hard labor: first I needed to determine the best location for each particular plant, then weed the area (every day I filled 2 - 30 gallon trash bags & hauled them off), dig out 4-6" of pea gravel, cut through 2 layers of landscape fabric, dig out and throw away clay and rocks, add cotton burr and then finally place the plant. On a good day, I could put in 6 plants. Needless to say, it was hot and sweaty work but when I went home it was a good satisfying feeling of being physically tired along with gratitude. Any stress I had in my life, and in particular that from the pandemic, was worked off with hard labor in the fresh air and sunshine. The area on the levee is very peaceful and quiet with a good view of the river and the city along with a sense of history. I watched hawks circling as they looked for food and listened to a variety of birds singing their morning songs. Hummingbirds would land and feed on the flowers of plants I had sitting out and hadn't even planted yet! Butterflies were in abundance and I also noticed new insects pollinating that I had never seen before. There was even the occasional eagle. I would sit back to take a breath and just inhale the peace and serenity.

Not only did I have this opportunity of meaningful work during the pandemic, but I was blessed in knowing that I was contributing to developing a needed ecosystem. Being able to put in native plants in such a vital area made me feel like I was helping not only the lower east side of

the city of Pueblo but also the planet as our ecosystems are in danger of collapsing. It seems like such a simple thing to do but makes a huge difference.

I so enjoyed going to Plaza Verde every day to work on the native plant garden at a time when I would have been stuck at home. Being out in nature is always relaxing and helps to promote good physical and mental health. I am so thankful for the chance I had to make a difference and also to help beautify the city. I feel the best blessing I received was from all the people who passed by and had such appreciation for the work I was doing and the difference it made for them. They truly liked the added beauty along the trail and that the plants were attracting more birds and pollinators for them to also enjoy. I received nothing but praise and thanks which was a great reward that I will always treasure.

Penelope Hyland
Master Gardener

PS After 2 summers, the work at Plaza Verde is still not complete and I have such feelings of attachment that I intend to continue the work this coming spring. I collected seeds from flowers I had already planted and will be putting those starts back in the garden. I was encouraged to see that some plants that had appeared to be dying off were showing new growth. I also spent time pruning and deadheading plants to encourage new growth. I hope to obtain donations of native fruit shrubs to attract more birds and complete planting in the final area. Of course, there is still weeding to be done!