

UM Native Plant Gardeners Honored

by Kelly Chadwick

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On Thursday, April 28th, approximately 100 friends and family honored six members of the Montana Native Plant Society with a beautifully catered surprise party hosted by the Division of Biological Sciences and the Clark Fork Chapter of the Montana Native Plant Society.

Sharing a common vision and working as a team, Sheila Morrison, Jean Parker, Jean Pfeiffer, Lois Puckett, Chin Won Reinhardt, and Peter Stickney were recognized as outstanding volunteers for their total 96 years caring for the Montana Native Plant Garden on The University of Montana campus.

Surrounding the Natural Sciences Building, a native plant garden was established in 1967 as a collaborative effort of faculty and students from the Department of Botany. The purposes of the garden were to educate students and the public about the wealth of garden-worthy plants that grow wild in the surrounding mountains and valleys and to learn about these plants' growth habits in an educational setting. Klaus Lackschewitz, late curator of the botany greenhouse, developed and cared for the garden until his retirement in 1976, but by 1989 it was beginning to decline.

That year Jean Parker and Jean Pfeifer took the initiative to renew and maintain this valuable resource. They forged a cooperative agreement between Facilities Services, the Division of Biological Sciences, and the Montana Native Plant Society to save these gardens for posterity. They organized a core group of volunteers, each of whom takes care of a particular habitat.

One day a week during each of the past 16 growing seasons, these volunteers have moved rocks, improved the soil, raised plants from seed, planted, weeded,

watered, labeled, pruned, and cared for the native gardens. During the winter they design and plan existing and new areas, as well as educational projects such as a brochure and informational display. Over the years they have recruited, mentored, and supported a series of additional garden volunteers for the project. One day a year they enlist students at the Volunteer Fair to assist with large garden projects.

The garden now includes ten representative Montana habitats with over 300 species and comprises a unique educational resource for the university and the community. The Montana Native Plant Garden is used by University of Montana Rocky Mountain Flora and Dendrology classes. In addition, grade school, high school, and Elderhostel classes, as well as the general public, have visited the gardens. People from around the country continue to use this garden to study and observe plants they might not otherwise have access to. The six volunteers give formal tours upon request, and graciously give impromptu tours to interested passers-by when they are working in the garden.

These dedicated individuals have cooperatively volunteered countless hours to the native gardens. Because of the commitment and passion to these gardens the University of Montana is a more attractive and educational environment.

At the reception, Erick Greene, acting dean of the Division of Biological Sciences, joined Marilyn Marler to publicly thank Sheila, Jean, Jean, Lois, Chin Won, and Peter, and gave each individual a framed photograph of a unique native plant of special interest.

Thanks to Montana photographers Drake Barton, Peter Lesica, Maria Mantas, and Wayne Phillips, who graciously donated these beautiful, autographed photographs.

Thanks also to Nancy Bernius for organizing the catering, Alice Oaken for an outstanding flower arrangement, Gertrud Lackschewitz and Joe Elliott for their

speeches and old photos of the gardens, and Dana D'Andraia, Alice Oaken, Marilyn Marler, and Gertrud Lackschewitz. Special thanks to Erick Greene for all his time, enthusiasm, effort, and support in making this long-deserved event happen.

And of course, thank you again to the outstanding native plant garden volunteers for the beauty they have nurtured and preserved.