
The Gem of the Montana State Arboretum

Missoula's Own Native Plant Garden

by

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Missoula is fortunate to be home to the University of Montana. The landscaped campus of this university has many old growth trees which add to the elegant beauty of the grounds. In 1991 the University of Montana Main Campus was designated the Montana State Arboretum. The arboretum seeks to “establish and maintain a living collection of plantings for public education, student instruction, scenic beauty, and a natural biological legacy for the citizens of Montana.” (University of Montana College of Forestry and Conservation 01). Within this arboretum lies the gem of the arboretum, the Montana Native Plant Garden. It so quietly fulfills every goal for the Main Campus Arboretum quoted above. It’s the not the most glamorous garden within the arboretum, but for all it contributes to the community, it is surely the dearest. Its priceless contributions aren’t limited to Missoula, the University, or Montana, its reputation reaches far from its home ground.

It provides such a unique collection of plants that artist Charlotte Staub Thomas traveled from the East Coast to view them. Ms,Thomas was told, at the prestigious Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, that our small native plant garden probably had more Lewis and Clark plants (plants Lewis and Clark wrote about in their journals) growing in one place than anywhere else. Ms. Thomas needed to sketch the Lewis and Clark plants for a book entitled “Common to This Country: Botanical Discoveries of Lewis and Clark.” In that book her acknowledgements contain the following: "Members of the Native Plant Society, North (sic) Fork Chapter, Missoula welcomed my many questions and enthusiastically shared their knowledge. Sheila Morrison introduced me to several native plants that she had cultivated in her garden and was a

tremendous help identifying species and supplying me with source materials. Kelly Chadwick's love and knowledge of plants was infectious; she gave generously of her time, introducing me to the native plants growing at the University of Montana" (Munger 128). Our native plant garden has gained recognition far from its home here in Missoula, where it is largely unknown and unappreciated.

This unassuming garden, tucked away in the heart of our U of M campus, gives Missoula citizens more value per square foot, than any other publicly funded place in the city. The funding for the garden is almost entirely by donation and volunteer work. It is a tremendous bargain for the community and the U of M. The garden, as we see it today, is the serendipitous result of passion, expert volunteers, three institutions, and forty years time.

The life story of the native plant garden was almost one of tragedy; it came close to having a short life ending in a long, slow death. What a great loss to Missoula that would have been. The garden started "On a Saturday morning in May 1967" (Newhouse 01) when the late Professors, Klaus Lackschewitz and Sherman Peerce began settling the native plants into their new homes. With help from a few students and faculty from the Botany Department and volunteers, the professors' garden grew to include approximately 400 plants. Klaus Lackschewitz further developed and cared for the garden until he retired in 1976. This was almost the beginning of the end.

After Klaus Lackschewitz retired, the Native Plant Garden fell on hard times. It was left untended, and one imagines, unloved or appreciated, until in 1989. This was the year the Clark Fork Chapter of the Montana Native Plant Society adopted the orphaned garden. This came about when members Jean Parker and Jeanette Pfeiffer, known as the two Jeans, walked by the

garden one day, and starting talking about what a good project this would make for the Montana Native Plant Society (MNPS). Since they were both active members of this group, they were successful in convincing the other members that the restoration and care of the native plant garden would make a good MNPS project. In addition to the two Jeans, four more members became part of the project; Sheila Morrison, Lois Puckett, Peter Stickney, and Chin Wan Reinhardt. These gardeners along with Kelly Chadwick, a more recent member of MNPS, have given endless hours of their precious time to this garden. Kelly Chadwick works in a professional gardening capacity for the University Center and is the unofficial liaison between the University and the MNPS.

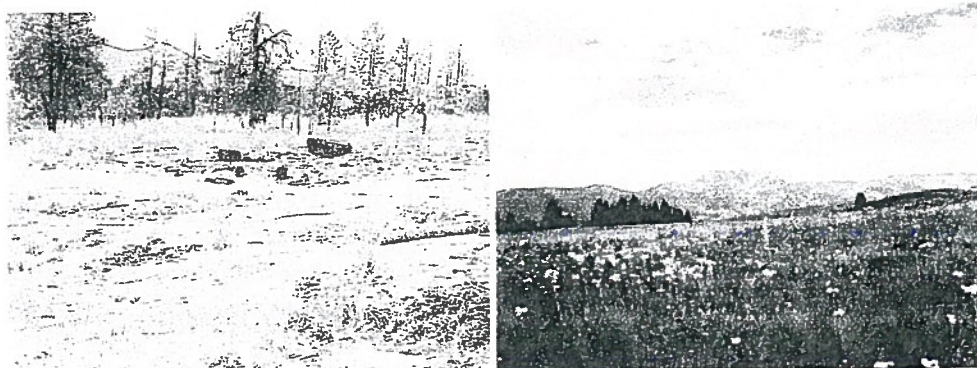
Interest in growing native plants is growing exponentially, here in Missoula as elsewhere, and this interest reflects a change in how residents are viewing their landscaping choices. Water is becoming scarce and expensive, which has generated awareness that how we choose to landscape can either help or hurt our community. Native plants are one way we can help, but they can be difficult to grow.

Missoulians are fortunate because our native plant garden is a testing ground for native plant survival in our particular urban environment. This is invaluable information greatly increases the ability for private and professional gardeners to grow these temperamental plants successfully. As Sheila Morrison writes in the introduction to her book, "Montana native plants are fascinating. They grow in amazing places. They refuse to grow in "reasonable" places. Seeds germinate nicely in the spring. Or they germinate in the fall just before a cold and nasty winter. Or they refuse to germinate at all under any conditions we try." (Morrison 04).

There are ten different habitats in the native plant garden, something to bring a sense of home or a new experience to anyone. It doesn't require money, or physical stamina to experience these habitats and special plants, shrubs and trees. It's easy to find from the University Center. If you have the west doors of the building at your back, you will see the garden just ahead and to your right. It wraps around three sides of the greenhouse and the low brick building attached to it. As you walk along the sidewalk parallel to the garden, on the right you will see a large raised garden map. There are flagstone and gravel paths that wind through the various garden habitats. Here you can warm and cheer yourself in a sunny prairie area, or cool off in a fern filled wood.

Wild native plants have a natural beauty that blends into the campus landscape just as they do in the wild. They enrich our experience, without intruding, drifting gently on the edge of our conscious awareness. Their loss would leave ugliness; a void that would not go unnoticed. It would scream into ones consciousness, and grate on ones nerves. No walk in the wild, river journey, hike or horseback ride, would be enjoyable without these native plants.

Our Native Plant Garden Helps Keep Plants in the Picture



The native plant garden, like the plants growing here, has shown its ability to survive through trying times. It offers a home to inhabitants from every corner of the state, while retaining its own uniqueness. This rugged but beautiful little garden, known far beyond the confines of the state, is truly representative of the best of Missoula.

I am comforted to know that if an ecological disaster occurs in the wilds of Montana, or right here in River City, we have our own "Noah's Ark" of native plants. The garden would be a crucial factor in our ability to restore wild plants to their native habitats. For this reason alone we must do what we can to keep our "Ark" afloat. Volunteering is an enjoyable opportunity to get invaluable hands- on learning experiences, while helping to preserve and maintain the gem of the Montana State Arboretum.

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