

Flower Creek Restoration Project

A Small Grant Report

by Vicky Lawrence

from Kelsey, Fall 2005

The Flower Creek Restoration Project (FCRP) originated from a city beautification idea of mass planting daffodils on an undeveloped, weed-infested, acre-size plot of land in the middle of Libby's shopping center on Highway 2. Flower Creek flows through this piece of land and was little more than a barren landscape. I shared my ideas with a neighbor who gave me the name of Mike Justus, a forester with Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. It is thanks to Mike's expertise and encouragement that our project became a reality.

Three basic problems confronted us with our expanding project: lack of water for irrigation (the creek dries up in July), a very harsh growing site (rocky soils and denuded creek banks rip-rapped to prevent flooding and erosion), and knapweed infestation. Mike's suggestion of xeriscape landscaping was the solution to the watering problem. Native, drought-resistant plants would have the best chance of survival and would restore a natural, more attractive appearance to the creek. Why not excavate large planting holes along the creek and import soil for a more favorable growing environment? With better soil, plants would need less water. Knapweed control began in the spring of 2004. Two truckloads were pulled from the softer creek banks and spraying with Weedar began on a regular basis.

I will candidly admit to the reader that I had never considered landscaping with native plants. Why spend money on chokecherries or wild roses when they already grow everywhere! I began research with the help of local Forest Service

personnel and the Internet and realized that the concept of xeriscape landscaping seemed very suitable to our needs.

Our high school biology teacher volunteered his students for a riparian restoration project and nine students of Libby's Master Gardening Class were eager to help with the final planting the first weekend of May. Libby Revitalization, Inc., agreed to sponsor the project. Mike suggested labeling our native plants with educational signs so people who visited the site could learn about each species of native plant. We also conceived the idea of a wooden sponsor sign to face Highway 2 giving credit to all major contributors to the project. I thought that we had a good project to offer MNPS and we were very fortunate to receive a grant for \$850 to cover the majority of the expense of the project.

Our final project had three planting sites: the east side of the creek where we excavated 18 planting holes 5' by 5' by 18" along the top of the 260' bank, the creek bottom where students planted willow and dogwood cuttings, and the narrow, west bank of the creek where we planted 20 plants including 4 trees. Survival rate on the east side is excellent among the 120 clump-planted specimens. The excavated area was covered in weed mat and then mulched with wood chips after planting. Volunteers imported water all summer for both the east and west side sites. Because of low snow pack, the creek did not rise at all this year and the cuttings did not survive. We will replant in 2006. Survival on the east side is about 65% with greatest loss among junipers.

We decided to plant a wide variety of species for our plant demonstration-education site including chokecherry, serviceberry, rose, snowberry, spiraea, potentilla, water birch, Rocky Mountain maple, mountain ash, mahogany, common juniper, mock orange, ninebark, and elderberry. Of the 160 plants purchased, 80% were bare-root stock, and the remainder were either potted or plugs. Three species, Oregon grape, kinnikinnik, and burning bush, were dug in

the wild. We planted about 2' apart in the excavated holes with the expectation of a 75% survival rate. If survival continues to be excellent, we will thin the clumps by transplanting to the west side of the creek.

The total cost of our project was \$1350.00. Plants cost \$498; non-plant purchases including 20 cubic yards of soil, weed mat and chemicals were \$509. The remaining \$343 will purchase materials for the sign that should be completed this autumn by Flathead Valley Community College students. A \$500 donation to the project came from Jason Rosauers of Seattle. Other donations included 20 cubic yards of wood chips, lunch for volunteers the day of planting, labor and machinery for excavation by the City of Libby, many hours of support by Forest Service personnel, and plant identification signs by Montana DNRC.

On behalf of Libby Revitalization, Inc., I would like to thank MNPS for awarding us this grant; we feel confident that your money was well spent on our project.