

VOLUNTEER POWER

The St. Albert Botanic Park was conceived, designed and planted by community residents, who continue to maintain it

Story and photographs by June Flanagan

Stretched along meandering banks of the Sturgeon River lies a public garden in progress. Entirely designed, planted, and maintained by residents in the community, St. Albert Botanic Park is an example of the power and determination of volunteers.

The garden grew from an idea conceived in 1990 by two citizens of St. Albert who shared a love of horticulture. Their vision was to create a trial garden in the region's zone 3 climate where trees, shrubs, and perennial flowers could be publicly tested and demonstrated. Former mayor Richard Plain and retired city landscape planner John Beedle, with the support of city hall and a core group of local volunteers including Patricia Bell and Gudrun Bublitz, have realized their dream. The 18-acre park was established in 1992 on property leased from the city.

John Beedle designed the park with input from local landscape architects. The concept plan outlines a series of theme gardens: rose, shade, cottage-style perennial, heritage, flowering trees, evergreen grove and restful garden. The theme gardens provide a setting for regional trials of ornamental plants. Displays of gladioli and dahlias, peonies, daylilies, Asiatic lilies, lilacs, and annual flower and vegetable trials are also in the plan.

OPPOSITE: Brilliant blue delphiniums bloom in the border of the Cottage Garden.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Roses and clematis clamber over the Rose Arbour, which serves as a backdrop for the Rose Garden; *Rosa rugosa alba* thrives in the large hardy rose collection; Pink 'Tournament of Roses' and red 'Ingrid Bergman' roses flourish in the large rose garden; a rustic wood fence lines the peaceful path meandering through natural areas between the gardens and the Sturgeon River; exquisite flowers of the 'Happy Thoughts' lily adorn the Lily Garden.

Groundbreaking began in fall 1993, with the planting of the Cottage Garden, where prairie hardy perennials are displayed against a rustic fence. Friends and interested members of the community supplied the plants. The following year, beds of Asiatic lilies, peonies and pink potentilla were added. Plant donations arrived from the Lily Society, the St. Albert Garden Club, Parkland Perennials, Hole's Greenhouses and local volunteers.

A walking trail along the river on the north side of the garden and a sidewalk on the south side are busy routes where pedestrians and bicyclists stop to watch the garden grow. The north side of the property is a healthy native plant habitat that slopes towards the river. The Society plans to leave the natural area undisturbed with the exception of planting a few trees and incorporating additional walking paths. Six acres on the sunny south side of the park are developing into the theme gardens. The large expanses of lawn are maintained by the city, while the demonstration gardens are maintained by volunteers.

canes will cook. The mulch also controls weeds and conserves moisture. Since much of the garden depends upon natural rainfall, conserving moisture is critical to its survival. Bell adds, "We can't really mention mulch without talking about our other volunteers—ladybugs. They love to hibernate in the mulch and do a wonderful job keeping pests away from our plants, especially the roses." Plans are underway to design a ladybug mascot named "Lucky" as a companion to the garden's existing mascot, a smiling flower called "Sunny."

The Society held their first Rose Show in 1998. They produced a guide to the planting, care and exhibition of roses, which is distributed to visitors. Hands-on workshops covering rose pruning and exhibiting also take place in the park. For the time being, the rose show and classes are held in tent canopies, with a goal of securing funds for a small building on the site. The property has a small farmhouse used for storage and as a meeting place. The show has expanded each year and is held in conjunction with a popular rose sale. Roses are grown in the small on-site nursery maintained daily by

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In addition to experience as a city planner, Beedle is a member of the Canadian Rose Society and a certified rose judge. In 1995 the Rose Garden was established as a major feature of the park. It consists of four concentric beds, each divided by four lawn paths. Bell says, "We knew that there were many roses available which could be successfully grown to survive our winters. Our desire was to show local residents and visitors what would grow and how easily it could be done." The St. Albert Rugby Club constructed a stone wall and the St. Albert Rotary Club donated and helped build the arbour. Roses spill over both features to compose an attractive background for the scene. The garden demonstrates 166 types of roses and contains 500 plants. It includes 350 shrub roses, making it the largest public collection of hardy shrub roses in Alberta.

Mulch is the secret to over-wintering 150 tender roses, mostly Hybrid Teas. Coarsely chipped wood mulch, courtesy of the City of St. Albert's mulching program, is applied to a depth of 30 cm (12 inches). The mulch produces heat as it decomposes and must be pulled away from the roses in spring or the

Tom Pagonis, another dedicated volunteer. After a few years of hauling water, the Society installed a water line for seedlings and plants in the nursery.

Early on, a hedge was planted to exhibit ornamental shrubs. About 2,800 liner-sized plants of 44 varieties were originally installed, but the young shrubs have dwindled to about 28 varieties while struggling to compete with weeds and lawn mowers. The survivors will eventually cover the chain link fence that surrounds the theme gardens—a fence intended to prevent beavers from wandering up from the Sturgeon River into the cultivated gardens. The hedge will also be filled in with vigorous hardy shrub roses that have outgrown their place in the Rose Garden. Bell says, "A source of great beauty, our Rose Garden also requires considerable maintenance due mainly to the overzealous shrubs that want to take over. Our goal is to remove some of these varieties and place them in an area where they can ramble."

The annual flower and vegetable Trial Garden, and lots of sunflowers, were added in 1996. New cultivars and heritage varieties are tried each year.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Poppy, corn and sunflower cultivars are tested beside a variety of flowers and vegetables in the Trial Garden; a lovely natural area separates the St. Albert Botanic Park's cultivated gardens from the Sturgeon River; expanses of lawn are bordered by daylily beds in the Daylily Garden; a pastel Pink Mondav daylily; Scarlet runner beans cover the nursery fence with attractive flowers and edible pods; goldenrod attracts pollinators to the Cottage Garden. OPPOSITE: This bench in the Restful Garden commemorates the International Year of Older Persons. It was donated by the St. Albert & Area Retired Teachers Association. A beautiful shade garden has now been created around it.

As other areas demand attention, the vegetable trials have been reduced, but the sunflowers remain one of the most popular displays in the park. The Trial Garden includes a small patch of gooseberries, currants and 15 types of raspberries. A garden tractor, rototiller and wood chipper, purchased with a grant received early in the park's development make this area manageable. To keep up with the monumental task of weeding, rows are assigned to volunteers.

Other displays include flowering crabapples and a large daylily collection. In 1999, the St. Albert and Area Retired Teachers Association donated a bench that was placed in a shady area called the Restful Garden. The following year they raised money for shade-loving perennials and shrubs near their bench. Bell says, "Some of their members are now helping us to weed and they have become a very important part of our operation. And better yet, we have all become friends."

Bell continues, "We are all gardeners who want more than what we can handle. Of course, if we thought small, we would still only have one flowerbed. We know we will never finish in our lifetime, but hopefully our grandchildren will continue what we have started." In addition to constructing a small building, future plans at the park include promoting the daylily collection, developing a website, and writing a garden column in the local newspaper. Patricia Bell's goals this year: "more volunteers, get a website up, no weeds, lots of rain and somebody to wear a 'Sunny' costume and wave at people!"

June Flanagan is a Lethbridge horticulturalist and co-author of *The Prairie Gardener's Sourcebook*.



Located on Sturgeon Road, 1 km east of Boudreau Road, the garden is surrounded by the Red Willow Park and Trail System, which winds through the city along the river.

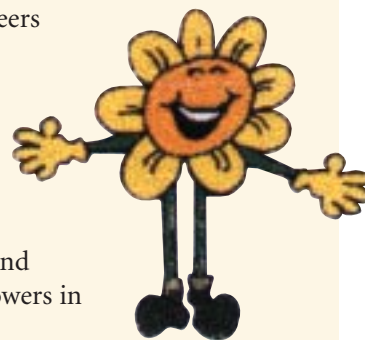
The Society of Friends of the St. Albert Public Gardens incorporated as a non-profit charitable organization to oversee the park's development. The Society and the city work together under the Partners in Parks program. The Society is a volunteer organization that invites donations of time or money from interested persons. Volunteers in the park will acquire "green thumb" skills from experienced volunteers.

To find out more information call Richard at (780) 459-8062 or Patricia (780) 458-1386. The St. Albert Botanic Park Society meets the 4th Monday of the month from September through May at VJ Maloney Jr. High School in St. Albert.

Membership or volunteer opportunities:

St. Albert Botanic Park Membership
33 Ash Crescent
St. Albert, AB T8N 3J6
pmbell@home.com

"Sunny" joined the park as its mascot in 1997. Volunteers came to be known as "Sunny's Helpers."



SUNNY'S PICKS

Roses recommended from trials in the park and from long-time rose growers in the Society.

SHRUB ROSES:

'Carefree Wonder'
'Elvishorn'
'Lichtkoenigen Lucia'
'Mont Blanc'
'Monte Cassino'
'Morden Centennial'
'Rheinaupark'

TENDER ROSES:

'Berolina'
'Double Delight'
'Folklore'
'Ingrid Bergman'
'Polar Star'
'St. Patrick'
'Trumpeter'

4TH ANNUAL ROSE SHOW AND SALE 2001 will be held July 14 & 15 at the St. Albert Botanic Park.