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MCC Rose Garden marks 25th anniversary

By Josh Ortega, Tribune Staff Writer
Apr 19, 2023



MCC's Rose Garden has won accolades from around the world. *(David Minton/Tribune Photographer)*

Since 1997, the Rose Garden at Mesa Community College represents just a part of MCC's 140-acre accredited arboretum – the first in Arizona to earn accreditation.

While MCC is the only community college in Arizona to be named a Tree Campus USA by the Arbor Day Foundation, the garden is a crown jewel for the main campus at Dobson Road and Southern Avenue.

As the garden marks its 25th anniversary, thriving partnerships between the college and rose societies – as well as with community volunteers – have created a stunning welcome to the campus and an invitation to “Come. Enjoy. Thrive.”

One of the largest public rose gardens in the desert southwest, the garden is more than a conservatory.

It is a living lab for kindergarteners through college students studying biology, botany, and horticulture – as well as the artists who come in search of inspiration from nature.

Whether its “snowbird” travelers enjoying the greenery of the garden during Spring Training or Boy Scout troops planting trees to earn their Eagle Scout badge, it beckons visitors year-round with over 9,000 plants from over 300 rose varieties

It has also brought global acclaim to the City of Mesa and MCC with rankings among the “Best Things to Do in Mesa” by sites such as TripAdvisor, Vacation Ideas magazine, Yelp and the Japanese travel site Trip 101.

Arizona produces more than 75 percent of the country's rose bushes because its climate allows them to bloom for nearly eight out of 12 months.

In 2000, the Rose Garden at MCC was approved by the All-America Rose Selections organization to become one of 26 test gardens, becoming one of the top three AARS Test Gardens in the nation.

Besides recognizing the volunteers who cultivate the garden with weeks-long pruning sessions, a ceremony also paid tribute to its architect, LeRoy Brady.

The father of two can't decide his favorite of the garden's four sections.

"That's like asking what's your favorite kid," Brady said. "

Since age 5, Brady has loved roses and horticulture in general.

He grew up in Durango, Colorado, but spent time at his grandmother's home in nearby Red Mesa, where he acquired his green thumb by taking cacti near the highway and transplanting them closer to the house.

"My grandmother made the comment once that I ignored people and spent my time with the plants," Brady said.

Brady graduated in 1966 with a bachelor's of fine arts in landscape architecture and environmental planning from Utah State University, and proceeded to spend eight years with the Idaho Transportation Department before the first phone call that would change his life.

The Arizona Department of Transportation noticed his work and asked if he would be interested in applying for a position.

"I came down for an interview, within a few hours they offered the job," Brady said.

Since 1974, Brady has worked as chief landscape architect for ADOT, supervising the landscape architecture and design and aesthetics along the state highway system, including revegetation after construction.

In 1996, Brady received another life-altering phone call – this time from Milt Lee, a colleague from Mesa United Way who told him about wanting to enhance MCC's image because a report had found "nothing unique about the campus."

“It was like cracker boxes surrounded by asphalt,” Brady recalled. “And they needed to do something that called attention to it.”

Briefly considering a quad area the college used for graduation, Brady settled on the current space along Southern Avenue and volunteered a sketch of the design that immediately earned the support of then-MCC President Dr. Larry Christiansen.

The first roses were planted in Section 2 in February 1997.

The concrete terrace, seat wall, sidewalk along the parking and screen wall were constructed a month later by Joe E. Woods Construction, which helped show what the garden was becoming and helped with raising funds to complete the garden section by section.

Brady said the curvilinear shape of the garden invites people to stroll all four sections that straddle the Rose Garden Way to the college’s main entrance.

Completed in 2005, sections three and four feature the Veterans Rose Garden that honors past, present and future members of the five branches of the U.S. military.

With over 60 varieties of plants given patriotic and military-themed names – such as “About Face,” “America,” “Fourth of July,” “Peace,” “Purple Heart,” “Stars and Stripe,” and “Veterans Honor” – nearly 2,000 roses encircle the flags of the United States, Arizona, POW, and the five service branches.

Rose beds with plantings completed in 2011 include two heart-shaped beds for love, two rose beds side by side for friendship, a large five petaled flower bed for beauty, and two circular beds with contrasting roses planted to create the peace symbol.

The design has also inspired a natural backdrop for photo shoots to commemorate special moments, something Brady has witnessed countless times over the years.

“Lots of people married, lots of people with graduation pictures, and on weekends, this place is just a lot of people all over,” Brady said.

Throughout his life, Brady, who has the title of Master Rosarian, has served on various city boards, as well as those of the Arizona Native Plant Society and the Mesa-East Valley Rose Society.

Today, visitors can still find Brady every third Saturday of the month working in the garden with the “dead headers” – a group of 150 volunteers who prune the plants.

That involvement highlights Brady’s vision for what he wanted the garden to become: a unifying force within the community.

“You always hope that it’ll take hold and become part of the community,” Brady said. “But the really important thing about the garden is the bringing together of people.”