

Valley rose gardens blooming

Volunteers and flower societies bring flowers to the desert

ANDREA GALYEAN

SPECIAL FOR THE REPUBLIC

June, in case you didn't know, is National Rose Month. But then again, nearly every month is rose month in Arizona.

From grandifloras to floribundas, a year-round display of blooms and good smells is one of the surprise perks of life in the Phoenix area.

And, thanks to the Valley's volunteer rose societies, those displays are free to enjoy at public rose gardens from Glendale to Mesa.

Sahuaro Ranch Park

What may have been the first rose garden in the Valley is blooming again at Glendale's historic Sahuaro Ranch. Built by the pioneering Bartlett family during territorial days, the ranch is now preserved as part of a city park. It includes a rose garden that dates to at least 1899, when the Bartlett's daughter Mary was married among the blossoms.

Although the surrounding land now includes ball fields and picnic areas, the original buildings and grounds have changed little over the years, said Jackie Anderson, who manages the park for Glendale's Parks and Recreation Department.

"We try to keep the main property as original as possible," Anderson explained, "so what you see here today looks very much as it did in the 1890s."

As a result, the property still includes graceful brick buildings, fruit orchards and peacocks that strut across the lawns. And, of course, roses.

In 2010, the city invited the Rose Society of Glendale to take over the garden, and in 2013, a local grower donated plants to help refresh the beds. Now, more than a century after the first garden was planted at Sahuaro Ranch, about 400 rose bushes bloom in front of the Main House. Frilly red roses, cheerful yellow roses and elegant lavender roses join together in a romantic show.

Candy Sheperd, a longtime member of Glendale's Rose Society, is one of the lead caretakers for the garden. For her, the opportunity to work in such a public setting is as attractive as her favorite plant.

"As rosarians, our mission is to educate people and to bring them together with a common hobby," she explained. "And the rose garden really helps promote that."

The Rose Society holds a rose show at the ranch every April, and Sheperd and other rosarians conduct pruning demonstrations there during cooler weather.

However, the garden is a popular resource for the entire community, Anderson said, and it attracts everyone

from photographers to families to the more than 1,800 couples who have followed Mary Bartlett's lead and held their weddings among the roses.

Encanto Park

For rose lovers in central Phoenix, there is another time-tested option for weddings, engagement photos or just a pleasant stroll.

Tucked into the south edge of Encanto Park, the Valley Garden Center Rose Garden was built in 1948 and holds a 99-year lease from the city of Phoenix. Al-



The Spirit of Freedom rose is one of 2,000 roses planted in the Veterans Garden section of the Rose Garden at Mesa Community College. The Mesa garden is the largest in the Southwest.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA GALYEAN



Jeannie Cochell, a certified rosarian, volunteers countless hours every year as the primary caretaker of the Valley Garden Center Rose Garden at Phoenix's Encanto Park.



Custom-made signs by local metal artist Joe Tyler welcome visitors to the Rose Garden at Mesa Community College. Tyler also created a bus-stop in the shape of a conservatory.



The first rose garden at Glendale's Sahuaro Ranch was planted in the 1890s, when the property was owned by the Bartlett family.

though the city supplies the water and mows the grass, the roses are maintained by volunteers from the Phoenix Rose Society.

With 600 rosebushes, the garden is a labor of love for Jeannie Cochell, the primary caretaker, who can often be found cleaning, pruning or replanting one of the garden's 40 beds.

Because most rosebushes live for only 20 to 30 years, the garden is perpetually evolving, with donations from local nurseries and growers filling in as older plants die off. But Cochell also sees the garden as an educational resource, so when she plants new bushes, she looks for varieties that people can try in their home gardens.

“Every time I’m here, someone will stop and ask me what kinds of roses grow in Phoenix,” she explained. “Well, the answer is almost all of them. So a better question is: What will give you the best bang for your buck?”

For Cochell, that means roses that are heat-tolerant, low-maintenance and disease-resistant, so she doesn’t have to use chemicals in a public area.

Newer hybrids like Dick Clark and Walking on Sunshine have earned their place in the beds, she said, along with classics like Perfume Delight.

With no walls or fencing other than a hedge of Iceberg roses, the garden is open to both the park and the surrounding neighborhood — which means plenty of people stopping to sniff. Encanto-area residents are daily visitors and, a few years ago, one neighbor even paid to restore the garden's concrete sundial, which was installed in 1963.

Cochell is delighted that the old garden still draws appreciation.

“This is a beautiful spot,” she said, “and I want people to enjoy it.”

Mesa Community College

Although the gardens at Sahuaro Ranch and Encanto Park have historic cred, the Rose Garden at Mesa Community College earns fame as the largest in the desert Southwest, with nearly 10,000 plants over 3.5 acres.

A collaboration between the college and the Mesa's East Valley Rose Society, the garden was designed in 1997 by Le-Roy Brady, a Rose Society member and professional landscape architect who hoped to revitalize a “no man's land” along busy Southern Avenue.

Two decades later, the space is an inviting refuge sheltered by a living wall of climbing roses, shaded by tall trees — many planted as Eagle Scout projects — and filled with roses. A nearby bus stop was designed by local metal artist Joe Tyler to resemble a Victorian conservatory, and matching pergolas and benches lead visitors along winding pathways between the colorful beds.

Students cut through the garden on their way to class, rose aficionados from around the country make it a destination, and the college hosts receptions on the event plaza, which is also available for weddings and other celebrations. Mesa Community College's horticulture and agriculture students visit the garden regularly, as do art and photography classes. Even the counseling department uses it, said Dawn Zimmer, the school's media-relations coordinator.

“If they have students who need to relax, they can prescribe 15 minutes in the rose garden,” she said. “It works!”

The roses themselves represent nearly 400 varieties, said Mary Lou Coffman, the garden's volunteer curator. They include some of the prize roses that ASU won in the 1987 Rose Bowl, as well as a descendant of the first rose brought to Arizona in 1865.

But, since 2000, the garden has also served as a trial site for the American Rose Society to test new varieties. And earlier this year, it was selected as a new trial site for the Sonoran International Rose Trials — a big honor in the floral world.

During the two-year trials, Brady explained, roses are evaluated for quality of bloom, form, vigor, disease resistance and how the bloom ages, or “finishes.”

And, as it's the only test garden in the



PHOTO BY ANDREA GALYEAN

The Veterans Garden includes a Blue Star Memorial bronze plaque mounted on a pentagon-shaped base. It was donated by the Arizona Federation of Garden Clubs.

PHOTO BY ANDREA GALYEAN

desert, the Mesa rosarians will also be evaluating heat-tolerance.

In addition to the original plantings and the test beds, the community college garden has also expanded to include two other sections.

On the west side, beds are planted in heart and flower shapes that reference the traditional meanings of the rose: love, friendship, beauty and peace.

And, on the east, a Veterans Garden features a bed for each branch of the armed services, as well as a flag terrace surrounded with rose varieties like Spirit of Freedom, Purple Heart, Veteranø Honor and, at the end, an orange grandiflora named About Face.

The rose garden at Mesa Community College is now so large that it offers an interactive cellphone tour, with recorded messages at 32 stops. And in 2018, the garden will get even bigger, adding a fifth section and another entrance.

That is because, although the garden is a point of pride for the school, it is entirely open to the public, said Zimmer, and is òa wonderful way to bring the community to the community college.ö

Volunteers welcome

As beloved as the public gardens are, they are managed almost entirely by volunteers, and all three welcome new helpers, especially for the major pruning sessions in October and January.

Sheperd relies on the big events to draw budding rose lovers into the fold.

òIt's a nice opportunity to get people involved,ö she said. òWe get everyone from high school and college students to retirees, which is phenomenal.ö

However, the gardens can use òdeadheadersö all year to remove spent blooms.

Volunteers don't have to be rose experts, Cochell stressed, and there are no requirements about when they work.

"I can train anybody, then they can do it on their own time," she said.

And the payoff, the rosarians agree, is worth it.

"Whenever we're here doing work," said Coffman, "people will stop by and tell us how much they love the garden. And they'll say how unexpected it is to find a garden like this here."

Roses shouldn't be so unexpected in the Valley, said Cochell. After all, she points out, West Valley growers produce 60 to 70 percent of the rosebushes sold in the U.S. And most roses will keep blooming despite the high temperatures of this particular National Rose Month.

"When there's a heat advisory for people, it's also hard on the plants," she acknowledged. "They're not putting out as many blooms, and the ones they do put out are smaller and not quite as fragrant. But they're very resilient."

So, even though peak bloom for Phoenix- area roses started in April, Cochell said the gardens are worth celebrating at any time.

"Nobody needs to grow this many roses for themselves," she explained. "That's the beauty of a public rose garden. It's here for all of us."



In 1899, Mary Bartlett, daughter of the pioneers who built Glendale's Sahuaro Ranch, was married in the original rose garden. The ranch has since become a popular site for weddings.

PHOTO BY ANDREA GALYEAN