GETTING OUR MESSAGE OUT WITH A DEMONSTRATION GARDEN

A native demonstration garden is a public landscape with a message. When placed in an appropriate location, it can provide an appealing visual experience while serving to educate the general public. The value and impact of a native garden grows daily amid chronic drought and increasing concerns about matching the water supply to future population growth in Texas. Beyond water, issues of habitat preservation, invasive avoidance and removal, and similar concerns can be addressed. Lastly the importance of proper maintenance can be demonstrated and then taught to others.

GETTING STARTED – FINDING COLLABORATORS

As in any new landscape there are many roles and tasks. This suggests that chapter sponsorship right at the beginning is recommended. This helps ensure that the work is widely shared, but also allows NPSOT newcomers to work with more experienced members and learn along the way.

Most opportunities for a good public location will be provided by others, who become the first group of collaborators. Public libraries, schools, the County courthouse, City Hall, other public buildings, and commercial establishments are all possible candidates. Likely collaborators also include local water utilities, whether public or private. This group is often motivated by a clear need to reduce water used for landscapes. The best sites will be those with the most exposure to the public.

A second group of collaborators might be the local Master Naturalists, Master Gardeners (including the Junior Master Gardeners), Agri-Life, NRCS, and other conservation and/or horticulturally involved organizations.

When setting up any project collaboration, it is important to establish at least a broad understanding of the demonstration garden goals, the role of each participating organization, how costs will be defrayed, etc. Individuals taking on the roles of project leader, landscape designer, and liaison among the collaborators should be clearly established.

PLAN, DESIGN, BUILD – THE FUN PART

Planning involves deciding the garden location, any specific objectives (butterflies, pollinators, wildlife habitat, etc.), the garden size and physical layout, and the water supply. Planning delivers the layout, a bill of material (list of plants and other materials needed, quantities, unit costs, etc.), and cost estimate. This phase is complete when all parties involved are in agreement and committed.

The planning phase should consider the tasks involved and what level of effort will be required both for bed prep (including removal of existing vegetation), addition of soil amendments, and placement of the plants. If “heavy lifting” is required, suitable resources from NPSOT’s collaborators may be needed.

When construction brings together volunteers from the collaborating organizations, knowledge is shared, the work gets done without strain, and the fun of building a garden can be shared by all.

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An important part of the project involves establishing the proper watering regimen both at the time of planting and for the long haul. Members may have to re-educate the collaborators about how to deliver water to plants with reduced needs. Automatic irrigation systems should be discouraged.

MAINTENANCE – THE BIG CHALLENGE

Much of our past experience with demonstration gardens has delivered best results when NPSOT members did the maintenance. Knowledge and TLC ensure that a garden looks well cared for year round. Alternatively, handing over maintenance to a city or county staff organization and their contractors has been disappointing, even when detailed instructions were provided. Some points to consider:

- If a native demonstration garden does not look good year round, we will have a hard time convincing the public that natives are a better way.
- Government entities are required by law to use competitive bidding and generally choose the lowest bidder for budget reasons.
- Private locations (e.g. a shopping center) may be more successful because they are more concerned with looking good all the time than lowest cost. This suggests there are “native competent” maintenance contractors out there.
- The third level of the Native Landscape Certification Program (NLCIP), currently under development, addresses maintenance training suitable for professional contractors. A certificate of competency will be available to maintenance professionals completing levels 1 and 3.
- In the end, our challenge is to train local maintenance contractors and then persuade government and private business organizations to insist on evidence of native competency before hiring. This is an important aspect of any collaboration.
- Temporary maintenance commitments are OK to train others and make contact with the public.

DELIVERING THE MESSAGE

Once the garden has been built and looking good, follow-up steps can be taken:

- Information brochures might be kept at the building entrance or in the lobby.
- Signage identifying plants, the sponsoring organizations, and contact information can be installed.
- Organized tours bringing students, garden club members, government leaders, and other interested groups can be organized.
- Local media can be enlisted to publicize the effort at all stages.

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