

Firewise garden takes shape in Bisbee

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Becky Orozco works in the newly planted firewise garden at the Bisbee school district administration complex. The Bisbee Rotary Club, Bisbee Bloomers, and Step-Up Bisbee/Naco are some of the co-sponsors.
Mark Levy/Herald/Review

BISBEE — The Old Bisbee Firewise Community Garden became a reality early Saturday morning as volunteers from Bisbee Bloomers, Bisbee Rotary Club, Step Up Bisbee/Naco and Old Bisbee Firewise (OBF) worked together to plant several types of shrubs and bushes.

The desert-friendly, low fire risk plants were put on display so that anyone wanting to plant around their properties would have an idea of what would work at the elevation and environment of the mile-high city, said Anne Carl, one of the founders of OBF.

“These plants are firewise and waterwise, meaning they will not be a fire threat if planted close to homes,” she added. “Our concern is to have a strategy that will apply throughout our entire community.”

Bisbee is surrounded by federal land and is designated as a Wildland Urban Interface area (WUI). It is also in the top five high risk wildland fire interface areas in the state, she said.

Thanks to a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management (DFFM) and on to OBF, the garden will be a teaching tool for all gardeners and landscapers, no matter the degree of experience, and school children, explained Carl.

Kay Lynn Cummins, Bisbee Bloomers noted trees would be added in the near future to add shade, while not adding to fire risk.

“This is a wonderful example of what you can plant in Bisbee,” Cummins said.

She also commended Step Up Bisbee/Naco for the fencing around the garden to keep out the deer and javelina. The fence stretches the whole length of a wing of the former school turned administrative offices for the Bisbee Unified School District.

The wing also holds the Copper Queen Library San Jose Annex and the Bisbee Science Lab. Educational programs are being planned for the children which will include outdoor fire safety, said Carl. Those programs were included in work plan for the \$20,000 grant OBF received.

Bisbee Bloomers will label all the plants and trees and will also keep an eye on the automatic water system which uses water from rainwater harvesting tanks, Cummins said.

“We’ll maintain the garden and keep an eye on the plants for five years,” added Cummins.

James Cain, Southwest Desert Images, was hired to develop the plan and choose the plants. He was there at 6 a.m. Saturday getting things ready for the big planting event, which around 20 people ended up turning out to help.

Cain noted, “The plants are all adapted to this area and readily available for purchase.”

Among the shrubs planted were desert salvia, rosemary, Texas mountain laurel, pineapple guava, Mexican and Cleveland sage, Rubina, nandia and orange bells. All bloom at different times throughout the growing season.

Cain had hoped to get the trees in, but they won’t be available for planting for a week or so. The trees plotted for the garden are mountain laurel, olive, desert willow, little leaf ash and Chinese pistache.

Al Anderson, OBF founder, said, “James has been remarkable. He’s gone above and beyond what we hired him to do.”

Cain landscaped the lot, formerly a messy, weedy, rocky area, and turned into a multilevel, winding delight, Anderson said. Cain will also bring in various colors of gravel — purple, tan, brown and more — to make it even more visually pleasing.

Coming sometime over the next several months is a “Peace Pole” which will stand at around six foot tall, said Tom Nelson, Bisbee Rotarian. The club donated \$1,000 to purchase trees for the Firewise garden.

“The word ‘Peace’ will be written in different languages,” he explained and is part of a district-wide project. “Every club will be doing something with a peace pole.”

The Bisbee High School construction class was going to make the pole, but the schools were closed. Nelson hopes the school will still help in the future.