

The Development of the Gardens on Spring Creek

The idea to build a community horticulture center in Fort Collins was conceived by Jim Clark in 1987, after a visit to Cheyenne Botanic Garden in Wyoming. Shortly thereafter, a team of citizens formed a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to creating a botanic center modeled after the public/private partnership between the Friends of the Cheyenne Botanic Garden Foundation Board and the City of Cheyenne.

As an intermediary step to creating a botanic garden, the non-profit group lobbied City Council to create a community horticulture program that was responsible for garden projects around the community. In 1995, City Council voted to fund a position responsible for creating the horticulture program.

Due to the success of that program and the continued efforts of the non-profit organization, funding for the creation of a community horticulture center was placed on the ballot as part of Building Community Choices (BCC). In 1997, Fort Collins voters enthusiastically supported BCC with 71 percent voting in favor of the proposal; \$2 million dollars was appropriated to create what is now the Gardens on Spring Creek.

Once initial funding was secured, the next step was to identify a location. Several sites across Fort Collins were considered. This site, in the Spring Creek corridor, was selected for its centrally located 18 acres. The Colorado State University Research Foundation (CSURF), a not-for-profit organization, owned the land originally. In a land-swap deal, the City of Fort Collins traded what is now the Annual Flower Trial Gardens at College and Lake for our site. The City also paid an additional sum for the land.

With a location now secure, the next step was to create a Master Plan for the site and identify a name. After much public input and a lengthy design process, the Master Plan, designed by local firm ED&AW was unveiled in 2000. A new name – the Gardens on Spring Creek – was created. And the non-profit board changed its name to be the Friends of the Gardens on Spring Creek.

When construction finally began, extensive grading had to be done, including moving the Sherwood Lateral, the irrigation ditch, from the south part of the property to where it is today—forming a natural water feature that connects us to Spring Creek. Unfortunately, the initial funding did not allow for the complete construction of the Visitors' Center so only one-half of the original design was built. Many features, including a conservatory, more office space, and the classroom had to be left off. Fortunately, the Friends were able to raise private funds to build the Evelyn Clark Classroom, a room that allows us to educate many youth and adults about the wonders and how-to's of gardening.

With the completion of the Visitors' Center, The Gardens officially opened its doors to the public in 2004. The grand opening of the Visitor Center was an exciting event, but now we needed gardens! The Friends Board and Gardens staff quickly got to work raising funds for what would be the first garden – the Children's Garden.

This was no small endeavor. We needed to raise nearly \$500,000 to build the Children's Garden. Fortunately, crucial support arrived when the four Fort Collins Rotary clubs selected the Children's Garden as their Centennial Project. Also significant was the support of Great Outdoors Colorado which awarded us a grant for almost half of the cost of the garden. Local

foundations and businesses also greatly contributed to the garden, and donations from our members and other individuals completed the fundraising process. Then the design process and construction began.

Designed by local firm EDAW, the specific mission of the Children's Garden is to provide children and their families with fun and experiential activities, in a community garden context, that connect them to nature, foster a "sense of place," and educate them about horticulture, botany and ecology. Its themes of community, gardening and sustainability are found throughout the various features of the garden including the Friendship Growing Garden and Greenroof Shelter. With much fanfare, the Children's Garden opened in September 2006.

We now had a Visitor Center and a Children's Garden but plenty of acres still to be developed. Then, in the spring of 2007, The Gardens founder, Jim Clark, unexpectedly resigned as the Director of the facility. Katherine Sanchez-Meador took over the reins for a short time but then moved on to other opportunities.

This time of transition also coincided with City of Fort Collins budget constraints, leaving The Gardens in a state of uncertainty. Fortunately, The Gardens has a private partner and during this uncertain time the Friends of the Gardens, in conjunction with the staff, kept the organization moving forward. The dedicated volunteer board launched the first Harvest Festival, and secured a landscape design for the Garden of Eatin'. With design in hand, the fundraising committee began to look for funding.

Michelle Provaznik became the Director of The Gardens in February 2008, and focused on the completion of the Garden of Eatin'. Fundraising was slow and steady, despite the down economy. By 2009, we had secured half of the money needed – enough to build the infrastructure of the garden and the pergola for the Outdoor Teaching Kitchen.

Mother Nature decided to remind us of her presence in early 2009. That year brought five inches of rain and six hailstorms, but the Garden of Eatin' did not waiver from its goal of becoming a sustainable edible demonstration garden. The first plants went in during the early summer of 2009, and with much celebration the Garden of Eatin' opened in September at the Harvest Festival. Even with the late start, we managed to grow approximately 2,500 pounds of produce to donate to the Food Bank for Larimer County. Final funds were raised to complete construction of the Outdoor Teaching Kitchen in the Garden of Eatin'. The Kitchen officially opened in September 2010 at the Harvest Festival with the first of many cooking demonstrations.

In 2010, a unique partnership opportunity arose between The Gardens, Frameworks Timber and the Timber Framers Guild to build an Outdoor Classroom, providing much needed covered outdoor space. The stunning timber frame structure, constructed out of six varieties of repurposed solid wood with the majority being beetle-kill pine, is now a much needed shelter of shade in the summer months and cover from the elements in the winter. The Outdoor Classroom is used for youth programs, adult classes, Santa's bench during Garden of Lights, and the Annual Spring Plant Sale.

Progress continued in 2010 in all corners of The Gardens. The boardwalk in the Wetland Demonstration Site on the far northeast corner of the site was constructed thanks to grant funding and the efforts of our community partner, Wildlands Restoration Volunteers (WRV). Native wetland, riparian, and upland plantings were completed in the first phase of the site in 2011—thanks again to WRV and additional grant funding.

Even in a severely depressed economy, The Gardens continued to find ways to build on its past successes. In 2010 and 2011, several other projects were underway, adding both new gardens and new structures to the site. Most notably, grant funding and in-kind donations were secured to begin construction of the notable Rock Garden, north of the Visitor Center. The berms were created, rocks placed, and flagstone laid for the walkway and patio in 2010. Thanks to the vision and direction of local landscape experts Kirk Fieseler and Maddy Weisz, and the hard work and efforts of staff and volunteers, the Rock Garden opened in September 2011. This unique and naturalistic garden features Northern Colorado native plants, non-native plants suited to Colorado growing conditions, and an outstanding collection of dwarf conifers set amongst locally quarried rock.

The Gardens community impact continued to grow through 2010 and into 2011. This impact was solidified even further when, in 2011, The Gardens partnered with the Parks Department to construct a hoop house to expand propagation capabilities for The Gardens and the City of Fort Collins. Production in the hoop house began in 2012. This expanded propagation allows The Gardens to grow more plants that are utilized for our gardens and the Spring Plant Sale, potted in downtown planters and medians, Old Town Square, and in flower beds, parks and street medians.

Another milestone was surpassed in 2012. This year marked the first time The Gardens surpassed 50,000 annual visitors through its gates with 16,000 of them coming during the month of December to enjoy our holiday event, Garden of Lights. This event positioned The Gardens as a destination during the holiday season, introducing many out of town guests and “first timers” to the beauty of The Gardens.

2013 looks to be a busy time here at The Gardens with plans for the Sustainable Backyard and Turf Demonstration site to be completed. Located next to the Outdoor Classroom, these “outdoor living” sections will add important how-to demonstration areas that are planned to educate and inspire visitors to implement easy, sustainable landscape practices into their own home backyards.

As we close in on The Gardens tenth anniversary in 2014, the future is bright. Many exciting projects are yet to come as we work towards the completion of our Master Plan. In fact, we are half-way there. We have our sights set on completion of The Great Lawn, Undaunted Garden, Prairie and Foothills Demonstration Sites. The Great Lawn will introduce a new outdoor amphitheater venue to Fort Collins which will host concerts, plays, weddings, and other community events in a more centralized location.

In addition, we anticipate finishing the rest of our envisioned Visitor’s Center building, which is planned to contain a LEED-certified conservatory, large meeting room, expanded gift shop, additional offices and a small café.

Stay tuned...