

Garden takes shape at hospital

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by Jessica Wierzbinski
Mail Staff Writer

About 15 local master gardeners and volunteers are developing a healing garden near the entrance to Heart of the Rockies Regional Medical Center.

Working under direction of ecologist and University of Nebraska professor emeritus Svata Louda, volunteers gained approval from hospital personnel for what Louda called an "ambitious design plan."

Other committee members include several of Louda's fellow master gardeners in training with Colorado State University cooperative extension.

Professionals on the design committee are master gardeners and include business owners Jean Wright of Salida and Cheryl Rauschke of Buena Vista; retired designer and builder John Graham of Salida; and landscape architect Tom Sullivan of Buena Vista.

"We proposed major structural changes to the hardscape of the garden," Louda said.

She said changes were necessary because the former garden being replaced was "too exposed and flat."

Arbors, berms, benches, pergolas and boulders are among elements committee members plan to incorporate into the garden to overcome flatness of the space and create visual contrast and private, secluded areas within the garden.

"It looked to me like it was designed to be a French formal garden," Louda said.

She described the former garden as "highly organized, manicured" and having "geometrically arranged plants. It didn't work well for Salida, and it didn't work well for a healing garden."

The new garden will be "more organic," Louda said. It will include shaded seating areas, "softer earth tones," and an atmosphere she described as being more peaceful, warm, and conducive to reflection and healing.

Parallel, circular walking paths featured in the original garden have been removed and will be replaced by "soft, meandering paths."

The paths will be functional and aesthetic, Louda said. She explained they will move traffic between the emergency room and the parking lot in a manner that is "efficient, but also pleasant."

At the garden center a fountain was installed, which Louda described as a "modernistic, canyon wall structure ... that really goes with the surrounding environment."

Volunteers are digging a small stream that will run through the garden fed by occasional runoff from the hospital roof.

Taking horticultural experience to the project, master gardeners are incorporating plants better suited to local conditions and to the "healing" nature of the garden.

The former garden was planted with, among other things, burning bush and lilacs. Louda said would have been beautiful - if they hadn't been eaten by grazing deer.

She said volunteers are seeking to preserve and transplant plants they can incorporate into the new garden, but are interested in new plants also. She mentioned the possibility of a medicinal herb section.

Memorial bricks and other figures with inscriptions will also be used in the garden. Heart of the Rockies Regional Medical Center Foundation is selling those bricks for future incorporation within the garden.

Gardeners and hospital officials estimate the project will require three to five years to complete.

Barbara Abel, medical center vice president of human resources, said scope and cost of the project require it follow a "phased development" plan.

She said many of the "larger pieces" like benches, boulders and pergolas, would be dependent on money available and donations to the hospital foundation.

For information about donating to the foundation, buying memorial bricks or other naming opportunities, contact the foundation at 530-2218.

Those interested in joining volunteers on the project may contact Louda at SLouda@UNL.edu.