

Gardeners really dig this cleanup

Volunteers begin 7th season caring for arboretum at Reading Public Museum

BY DON SPATZ
READING EAGLE

With kneepads strapped on, Judy Jablonski dug in the daffodil bed near the Reading Public Museum's main entrance — fluffing the mulch, edging the beds and pulling out the winter debris with other volunteers.

Across the museum grounds, master gardeners were overseeing a half-dozen teams, each with a half-dozen volunteers cleaning up the vegetation, getting the 26 acres ready for spring and summer.

"I love to garden; it's great exercise. I love to be outside; and these are great people to work with," Jablonski of Spring Township said. "And I also feel like I'm helping the community."

The grounds originally were planted as an arboretum — a collection of many kinds of trees and plants grown for exhibition — but in recent decades were neglected for lack of funds.

However, Wednesday marked the beginning of the seventh season for the arboretum assistants program, with volunteers coming out of winter hibernation to begin a task that takes one morning every week through October.

"The museum couldn't afford to hire people to do this," said Gerry Gobrigh, chairman of the arboretum committee. "Without the volunteers, there would be no plants. It would be overgrown and unattended — much as it was before."

"Before" was before the volunteer program began, when the museum struggled to keep up the grounds.

But Gobrigh beams when talking about the volunteers' enthusiasm and the sheer volume of work they do.

"Everybody is into it; there are no slackers," agreed Claudia Eberly of Hamburg, a master gardener overseeing a team cleaning up a long rock planter near the arboretum's



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Spring cleanup volunteer Judy Jablonski of Spring Township clears a daffodil bed outside the Reading Public Museum. In the background, master gardener Kyle Boyer of Rockland Township, right, instructs volunteer Toni Groff of Orwigsburg.

western end.

The planter's untouched middle was a muddle. But where the volunteers had worked, the tulips, windflowers, brunaria and coral bells showed proudly.

"I like to see the changes we make when we're done for the day," said team member Susan A. Haag of Cumru Township.

"It's an amazing place to watch develop," Eberly said. "It's absolutely awesome."

"It's nice to see a finished product here with so many people working together," said Kyle Boyer of Rockland Township, leading work at the daffodil bed.

Some volunteers come from as far away as Orwigsburg, such as Toni Groff, who said she makes the trek just because she enjoys helping make things look pretty.

The museum has a master plan for the arboretum — for pergolas, winding paths and hundreds of new trees — that it will do over a decade as it wins donations.

What the volunteers want to do is show potential donors why the place is worth it.

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Arboretum's roots

A century ago, the land along the Wyomissing Creek just upstream of what is now Museum Road was alive with the color of hybrid peonies, irises and phloxes, for in 1913 it was a nursery and garden owned by horticulturist Bertrand Farr.

But Farr relocated the nursery to Womelsdorf in 1918 and sold the Wyomissing land to developers.

A few years later, the developers gave the land to Reading School District teacher Dr. Levi Mengel, who was looking for a home for his 20-year-old Reading Public Museum that at the time was housed in the school administration building.

When the museum opened to the public, Harvard University landscape architect John Nolen developed long-range planting plans for the 26 acres around the new museum.

His idea was to turn the former peony fields into an arboretum — a collection of many different kinds of trees and plants grown for exhibition purposes, sort of an outdoor museum to complement the indoor museum.

Many of the 65 different types of species ultimately planted there came from Harvard and from Farr, and many remain today.

Source: Reading Public Museum



Take a peek

Video from the cleanup is available with this story at readingeagle.com