

Self-instructional water-conserving garden

The Situation

Creating and maintaining beautiful home landscapes in the semi-arid west, which includes much of eastern Idaho, is resource intensive. Average annual precipitation in the local region ranges from 8 to 12 inches, falling short of the required 35 to 40 inches of water per year necessary to maintain a traditional landscape. Additionally, these same landscapes require application of fertilizers, pesticides and other non-sustainable inputs. Lastly, negative environmental impacts can be associated with “imported” landscape plants that do not fully support native pollinators and small animals.

Conserving water and resources is not only a matter of environmental stewardship; it may also be a financial concern. In urban areas where water is metered, residents with even small yards can spend over \$200 per year to irrigate a lawn and landscape, and those with larger yards spend considerably more. In addition to water, equipment and fuel to mow lawns plus required applications of fertilizer and herbicides needed to maintain a healthy landscape add to the expense. Weekly or more frequent mowing also can take a considerable amount of time allowing less time for residents to enjoy their outdoor landscape.

Homeowners are often looking for ways to reduce monetary and time inputs for maintaining a landscape and to become better environmental stewards of their property. Reducing the amount of water used for irrigating a landscape is an excellent way to lessen maintenance expenses especially in areas where water is metered and paid for by the quantity used. Gardening with water-conserving native plants will reduce water use while at the same time allowing homeowners to improve their stewardship by reduc-



Native Perennial Plant Garden - Blackfoot

ing use of non-sustainable products and allowing them to create habitat for local fauna.

Our Response

The traditional Extension approach for disseminating information is via face-to-face workshops and seminars, newsletters, popular press, and within the last decade or so, the Internet. The Internet has allowed clientele to access information on their time schedule rather than attending a workshop or waiting for information published in a newsletter or the popular press. In spite of simple access to remarkable quantities of information, nothing can replace a high-sensory, hands-on experience for learning.

To show plant materials and design elements needed to create a low-input garden, Idaho Master Gardener™ volunteers and the Extension educator established a demonstration landscape in a 15 x 60-foot

area in front of the Bingham County Extension Office. Installation was initiated in 2011 and completed in 2012. Signs were installed that provide common and scientific names of each plant in the garden. A handout describing the plants in the garden was developed and made readily available for those interested in the landscape. Additionally, clients could obtain more information contained in a University of Idaho Extension bulletin, BUL 862, Landscaping with Native Plants, which also discusses the plants in the demonstration garden, and how to design and care for a native plant garden. Traditional methods of information transfer are also being used with one tour being conducted in 2012 and more educational events planned for summer 2013.

Program Outcomes

This project allows for a self-instructional tour of a low-input garden that is freely accessible to the public at a convenient location at all hours of the day. Verbal feedback from visitors has led to more detailed inquiries and additional opportunities for teaching. It is difficult to determine the exact number of people who have observed the landscape, but considering the number of known direct contacts at the Extension office, it is likely the number of people who are learning from this project far exceeds the number that would be attracted to a conventional one-time workshop. Self-instructional learning allows the participant to come back to review the landscape at anytime to see its growth and development as it matures and to experience additional self-guided learning.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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