

Campus Architecture

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v53/i25/25b01601.htm>

From the issue dated February 23, 2007

U. OF NEVADA AT LAS VEGAS

For a Desert Campus, More Than Rocks and Cactus

By GOLDIE BLUMENSTYK

Las Vegas

In most parts of this city of neon and glitz, it's easy to forget — in fact, almost impossible to believe — that Las Vegas lies within the Mojave Desert.

Yet here at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, just a few miles from the ornate fountains and high-rise casino hotels of the Strip, desert gardens bloom with surprising shocks of color: bright-red plumes of bird-of-paradise plants, deep-orange flowers of the globe-mallow bush, and purple, orchidlike blossoms of desert willows.

The campus gardens that punctuate this 335-acre campus range in size from small strips along sidewalks planted with cacti and pink Regal Mist grasses to the showcase one-and-a-half-acre Xeric Garden, which snakes like a river away from the entrance of the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Natural History. The gardens serve a twofold purpose.

For one, they are educational, demonstrating the rich diversity of plant life that can thrive in a desert climate. The Xeric Garden is home to 77 different species of plants and 20 species of trees. The name comes from the Greek *xeros*, which means dry.

When the first such garden was installed on the campus, in 1988, the idea was "to prove that a xeric garden isn't just rocks and cactus," says Susan B. Jones, collections manager for the university arboretum, which encompasses the entire campus. But until recently, when Ms. Jones and an educational manager, Paula Garrett, were hired, the university was doing little in the way of formal education or plant management.

The gardens, which have replaced lawns in many places, also help the university meet its civic responsibility to reduce water use, a factor of increasing importance as southern Nevada enters the seventh year of a record drought. Like the rest of the region, the university operates under water-use restrictions imposed by the southern Nevada Water Authority. From November through February, watering is allowed just one day a week. In fall and spring, watering up to three days is allowed.

The university is replacing lawns and grassy berms with smaller "xeriscapes" and other kinds of surfaces and landscaping that require less water. Since 2002 grounds crews have converted more than 76,000 square feet of turf on the main campus, for an annual savings of more than four million gallons of water. A typical sprinkler head puts out about seven gallons of water a minute, but drip-irrigation systems, which are used in the xeriscapes, put out about a gallon an hour.

A few lawns here remain sacrosanct. University officials will preserve the two long grassy malls that run north-south and east-west across the campus — shady expanses that are popular spots for students lounging and tossing Frisbees.

Most of the 120 species of trees that Ms. Jones has identified on the campus are located on the malls, including a number of nonnative species such as mulberry and fruiting olive trees, which have since been banned by the county because they produce so much pollen. Aside from the malls, there is not much turf left to convert. "It's down to little patches," says Ms. Jones.

Robert Lynn, director of facilities, points to a grassy berm alongside the College of Education as well as strips of grass along the perimeter of the campus as some of the few remaining targets, budgets permitting. "It's all a matter of money," he says. The university does not regularly allocate money for turf conversion but has been able to pay for some of it with money from the water authority. It pays landowners as much as \$2 per square foot for turf converted to xeriscapes and other qualifying uses. The university has collected more than \$56,000 in that way since 2002.

The university is not fanatical about turf conversion. It even installed some new lawn two years ago as part of the courtyard for a new residence hall. "The kids like some green spaces to sit on," Mr. Lynn explains.

The impetus for the xeriscape gardens did not come from outside, current and former university officials say. "We were in the business of water conservation long before the water district was," says Dennis L. Swartzell, facilities manager emeritus for the campus. He retired in 2002 and now works for a local plant nursery.

Mr. Swartzell, who came to UNLV in 1982, admits that xeriscaping was not high on the agenda early in his tenure. "We didn't really embrace the fact that we lived in the desert," he says. The president at the time, Robert C. Maxson, reportedly didn't either.

Mr. Swartzell recalls that in the late 1980s, he and a local landscape architect, Jack W. Zunino, proposed establishing the Xeric Garden, the first noteworthy one of its kind in Las Vegas, and recommended putting it on the edge of the campus, where it could be seen by passing motorists. But the president resisted. "He wanted it hidden in the interior," Mr. Swartzell says.

Crestfallen, Mr. Swartzell and Mr. Zunino chose instead a two-acre plot of lawn in front of the Barrick Museum. Local companies donated the irrigation equipment and plantings, and members of nearby horticultural clubs spent weekends planting 600 shrubs. The university's facilities department handled most of the construction, with some help from inmates from a nearby jail.

Initially the flora was even more diverse than it is now. Mr. Swartzell and Mr. Zunino designed the garden to feature plants and trees from the four major desert regions of North America as well as plants that thrive in arid regions of Australia, the Mediterranean, and South America. Two years later, a hard freeze hit the city, killing off some of the eucalyptus, saguaro, and other less-hardy plants. Since then, the groundskeepers who oversee the plantings have avoided some of the more-fragile plants in favor of native Mojave species and others that can survive the hot summers and cool winters.

The initial garden was also a bit bigger. When Wright Hall, a classroom building, was renovated in 2005, about half an acre was lost.

Since the first garden was completed, the university has developed a number of other, smaller desert

gardens, including one near the health-sciences building dedicated to the memory of Nevadans felled by AIDS and a spot outside the sleek new library, which opened in 2001.

Although they require less water and less attention from grounds crews than traditional lawns, the desert gardens are not maintenance free. Mr. Lynn, who has carried on Mr. Swartzell's campaign to spread desertscaapes around the campus, says that after five years or so, he has to replace the red-ocher gravel used in the AIDS-memorial garden and others. It fades to a dull gray "that doesn't look as good," he says.

The university is still without a master plan for landscaping, but Ms. Jones and others say they will promote the use of desert plants and other xeriscapes whenever an area is converted or a landscaping opportunity opens up with the construction of a new building.

Meanwhile, Ms. Jones and Ms. Garrett are developing a comprehensive catalog and educational program for the arboretum that could help to inform future decisions about landscaping. One idea, Ms. Jones says, is to develop a small medicinal-plant garden on a patch of lawn at the rear of the health-sciences building. And as a new science-and-engineering building nears completion, she hopes Mojave Desert plants will come into the landscaping picture there.

Mr. Lynn is looking for opportunities as well. In the current budget, the facilities department received \$100,000 for landscaping.

Mr. Lynn says the department hopes to use the money to plant cactuses and other desert plants along the edge of the campus — so people in the cars driving by can't miss them.

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Campus Architecture

Volume 53, Issue 25, Page B16

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