

Plant Exchange

Plants For A Place Like No Other

Share tips from your outdoor or indoor plant experience, give us a tour of your plant site, or just let us know what you enjoy most about the plants and people who grow them. Contact news@yankton.net Attn: Brenda Johnson or write to P&D, 319 Walnut St., Yankton, SD 57078, Attn: Brenda Johnson.

BY BRENDA K. JOHNSON
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When you think of a favorite place in its natural setting, plants unique to that site add a lot to the picture, Black Hills and pines for example. If you want a site to stand out as one of a kind, landscaping with plants natural to that area can make it memorable.

MAKING A PLACE STAND OUT

Many college campus landscapes look alike in the summer “off season” with buildings, a few statues, some trees, and perennial greenery. Not Chadron State College (CSC) in Chadron, Nebraska, southeast of the Black Hills. Making a difference in signature landscaping at CSC is Lucinda Mays.

“I hate to buy a plant that [only] tolerates alkaline soil,” said Mays, horticulturist at Chadron State College. “I don’t want a plant to limp along. These plants haven’t had fertilizer, haven’t had irrigation this year, just rain. I watered them once with a soaker hose in the drought last year. We had 5.8 inches of rain last year.” Native and naturalized plants that she grows here can be found elsewhere on the Northern Great Plains. Growing hardy and well adapted plants in this setting for historical and cultural reasons highlight this place as different from others.

Missouri Valley region shares common ground with Chadron’s sometimes alkaline, sometimes sandy soil, winds, summer heat, dry conditions, cold, and changeable weather of the Great Plains.

Drought resistant flowerbeds about which she speaks lay on the east side of the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center on the CSC campus. One of the beds has a berm in the center. “I put plants that prefer driest conditions at the top [of the berm] and plants that can take more moisture near the bottom. Gravity pulls water down and away from the roots of the plant,” Mays said.

She refers to nearby Chadron State Park. “You’ll find cactus, yucca, and Liatris near hilltops.” In the flowerbed, they are on the crest of the berm. Yucca is common to the area but as a specimen plant, she notices campus visitors and the local community checking their plant labels for information. She indicates that Baptismal or False Indigo is placed in a lower area in the bed because it prefers slightly more moist soil. Mays observes naturally growing plants while she considers what and where to plant.

“I like to have plant [features] to look at any time of year. Missouri primrose blooms in summer and its seed pods look like potato chips in the fall,” she said.

“It’s a trick to have plants bloom in combinations. She points to sky blue harebells and yellow buckwheat in bloom. She installed yellow columbine near blue false indigo. She placed mauve prairie smoke and pasque flowers next to evergreen yuccas. Later Maximillion sunflowers and true blue Indigo sage will bloom.

“You can tell if a plant is suited to an area if it travels,” Mays said. “Columbine as a perennial doesn’t last many years but it scatters its seed. This same prairie garden looks different every year.”

CLAUDE BARR SAMPLER FLOWERBED

Plants mentioned above are included in the Claude Barr sampler flowerbed. Gardeners in our area may find plants like these in local nurseries. “Claude Barr was such a



PHOTO: BRENDA K. JOHNSON

Yuccas, also called soapweed, dot hilltops near the Chadron State College campus at Chadron State Park. Why would Lucinda Mays put a plant common to the area in the campus flowerbed? In her job as horticulturist at Chadron State College, she sees visitors and locals reading the plant label for information.

LUCINDA MAYS’S TOP THRIVING PLANTS FOR NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

- Crested prickly-poppy or *Argemone polyacanthos*
- Prairie goldenrod or *Solidago missouriensis*
- Sandhills ground-cherry or *Physalis hispida*
- Prairie purple coneflower or *Echinacea angustifolia*
- Tall goldenrod or *Solidago altissima*
- Blue gramma grass or *Bouteloua gracilis*
- Buffalo grass or *Buchloe dactyloides*
- Little bluestem grass or *Schizachyrium scoparium*

seedsman,” she said. “He grew plants on his ranch [near the Badlands] in harsh alkaline soil. He recognized some plants as having ‘garden merit’.” Mays said that Barr collected seed on his travels around the world and introduced these to the nursery trade. Plants in nurseries with labels “Great Plants of the Great Plains” were inspired by Barr’s introductions of the 1930’s – 1950’s era. Barr’s book *Jewels of the Plains* [available via South Dakota Interlibrary Loan] was Mays’s source for selecting drought resistant plants in this flowerbed.

“I find the Claude Barr plants to be excellent for the home garden. They’re easy care,” Mays said. “His plants had very little water and poor soil. If he could grow them there, we can grow them.”

PLANTS INTRODUCED BY PERMANENT SETTLERS FLOWERBED

Mays said that the Chadron area began to be settled with immigrants after 1883. She had studied the settlement of the area to fulfill her Masters Degree at CSC and later combined it with horticulture interests where she worked part-time in a project for the Mari Sandoz High Plains Heritage Center. “Sandoz Center director wanted the landscape by their building to honor the legacy of Mari Sandoz and tell the story of the heritage and history of the High Plains.”

“I went to abandoned home sites around the county and found these plants and brought them here [to this flowerbed]. I visited sites of sodhouses and dugouts; that’s where I found these plants.” Growing are hollyhocks, cooking sage, rhubarb,

horseradish, horehound, a form of re-seeding lavender, and walking onions.

“When the tops of these onions get heavy, they tip to the ground and new onions grow,” she said. The flowerbeds are arranged with walking paths so the visitor can wander through and contemplate immigrants who brought these plants to the area.

PLANTS IN SIGHT OF MARI SANDOZ’S GRAVE FLOWERBED

Chadron is southwest of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and the writer Mari Sandoz was an early Native American advocate. “Lakotas traveled through this area but they didn’t settle here,” Mays said. These plants were collected from the Sandhills of Sheridan County near where Mari Sandoz is buried.

“I worked with the range management and botany professors here at the college to grow a teaching collection of Sandoz plants. When I visited her grave, I could see these plants,” Mays said.

Another flowerbed has plants that pre-immigrant settlement Lakotas found useful. “We think of Lakota as following the buffalo in those days,” she said. “In fact, they also followed the plants to harvest their seed, fruit, and roots. They passed by plums when the plums were ripe on purpose. They found purple coneflower to harvest its root when it was ready. So many ways to understand how plants are part of the landscape of human experience.”

LANDSCAPE FOR RESPONSE

Her task is to show the Mari San-

doz and High Plains legacy with plants in these flowerbeds. “It’s layer upon layer. The taxonomist from the college helps find these plants,” she said. “If you visit here from another state you may say, ‘Ah, that’s what Sandhills plants look like.’ If you grew up in the Sandhills you might say, ‘I haven’t seen sand cherries since I was a girl.’ There are lots of ways to involve people in a landscape.”

“Oh, the rose is blooming!” you might say. The teacher might bring her students and say ‘Let’s see what a rose looks like.’ The horticulturist might say, ‘This rose is pinker than usual. Is it because we are having a cool spring?’” All the flowerbeds have cement walkway boundary edges. These flowerbeds can be viewed from all sides and the plants within are arranged to be welcoming in all directions. Pathways wind through the beds, inviting visitors to move among plants.

She conveys her gratitude for the college, the Sandoz Center, and the community that has supported her efforts. “The college is dedicated to have teaching collections of plants. No one has to explain its merit; you don’t have to lobby. Our community has watched the beds go in.” She teaches an occasional horticulture course at the college and college students and members of the community attend.

ELEMENTS OF GROWING SUCCESS

“Everything we grow here, I plan on drought because we live in the High Plains,” she said. “We do soil preparation carefully, we choose plants carefully, and we site plants carefully. I like to plant ornamentals on the east side of buildings where they get morning sun and a break from afternoon heat.”

Before she puts a plant in the ground, she plans how it will be watered. “I like drip irrigation. I buy big rolls of thin black vinyl line and punch emitters in where the plants are. I add mulch on top of the line. We have 185 acres of buildings, lawns, and flowerbeds. This spring we turned on a tap for a teaching collection of plants watered by a 3,000-gallon rain/snow barrel. I’d like us to do more of that as we can.”

“Someone asked me how come my plants don’t die. I told them I get rid of the evidence,” she said.

Mays learns local growing conditions. “Temperatures can drop fifty degrees in a day. We have about a hundred frost free days. Alkaline soil here is about pH 8.1 – 8.3. I didn’t believe the results of the first soil test. Two miles east of here the soil is sandy.” While Missouri Valley conditions may be more temperate, gardeners generally try to grow plants suited to location that thrive.

She looks for others with area plant expertise. “My neighbor across the street gave me the Claude Barr book. I hadn’t heard of him before. He was self-taught but recognized by experts.” She took the book with her to the nursery and was amazed how many of the plants listed in the book are still sold there.

“My experience is that everything I found in the book that I put in the ground has thrived.” She calls the Claude Barr sampler flowerbed her “test garden”. If a plant does well there, then she tries it in other areas of the campus.

Mays previous experience included explaining about plants as well as growing them. In her CSC horticulturist position, she grows, tends, and teaches about plants.

“There’s nothing I’d rather do,” Mays said. Her work illustrates how plants can show unique qualities of a place that are unlike any other. Her skills, cooperative efforts across campus, and administrative priorities have resulted in one-of-a-kind flowerbed plantings at the Sandoz Center and around campus that makes a place stand out.



Gardener To Gardener

Share what you find useful for gardening.

Dot Blaha of Yankton is a practical master gardener. “These are tips that I do no matter what the weather conditions for this season,” Blaha said. “Happy gardening.”

- I bury a one-gallon plastic jug that has had small holes in the bottom, next to a plant that needs more water than it is getting from nature. The jug is filled with water as needed during the season. It slowly waters the roots of the plant.

- Mulch is one of life’s necessities when rain is in short supply. I plant vegetable rows perhaps 2.5 feet apart. Just as plants appear in the row, I mulch with a layer of cardboard or four layers of newspaper and anchor with straw or grass clippings to conserve moisture. If it rains, water will run off into the vegetable row. Either way, mulch prevents weed growth. Both decompose over a season and can be turned back into the soil.

- Another gardener’s necessity is a notebook. Draw out the garden plan and mark each row or plant position with the name of the plant as you plant. Make notes on what you have done to that row or plant, how it has grown, if insects are a problem, etc. It will help you decide if you want to plant that one again.

- One little trick came from a friend. Many times seed packages do not have a photo of what is going to come up. Keep the package and re-use a picture from a seed catalog. Put those into a small zip-lock bag anchored on the end of the row.

Plant Exchange: Blog With Us!

This blog is an interactive site for people of our USDA Zone 4-5a region to exchange ideas about plants. Want to read some past Plant Exchange features you missed? Want to share a comment about plants?

- How does a local homeowner replace lawn with a cottage garden and personalize her backyard with Pinterest ideas?

- What is a technique for mowing that encourages native plants to grow in your country acreage?

- What are container gardening tips for growing flowers, herbs, and vegetables?

- Want to see and read about what’s growing and blooming around the United States and elsewhere? Select “Garden Bloggers Bloom Day” July 15th link.

- See how the collaborative project to create more butterfly and native plant habitat at Lewis & Clark Recreation Area unfolds.

Check our blog at: www.brendakjohnsonplantexchange.wordpress.com

August Plant Tips

Mr. Lawrence Young of Menards, 3210 Broadway in Yankton, (605) 665-0205, shares tips from Menards’ Garden Center for your yard and garden.

- When planting fall bulbs to bloom next spring, use a colored plastic golf tee to mark the location so that you don’t accidentally disturb the bulbs when working in your planting beds.

- Be sure to check containers and baskets for water needs multiple times during hot and/or windy days. These will dry out much faster than planting beds and may need to be watered multiple times.

- If you planted onions in your garden, be sure to pick off any of the flower buds on top of the onion plant. This will direct the plant’s energy into bulb production for a better harvest.

- Pick up fallen fruit from your fruit trees and destroy it to help reduce the potential for insects and disease in your fruit trees next season.

- If you are composting, be sure to keep weeds out of your compost pile. Weed seeds can survive in compost piles and will germinate next season.



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Dibbles & Bits

- Great Plains Native Plant Society promotes appreciation of Great Plains plants in the spirit of Claude Barr like the pasque flower. They are constructing hardscape for a botanical garden near Hermosa, South Dakota. Other activities include fieldtrips, native seed exchange, and newsletter. www.gpnps.org

- Watering a newly planted tree until established can be tedious. A one – two inch diameter tree needs about ten gallons of water per week. Drill a ¼ inch hole on the side near the bottom of a five gallon plastic bucket. Fill the bucket twice and water both sides of the tree each week. Water more in hot weather. More details: August 2013 Garden Gate magazine, found in Yankton Community Library.

- Catmint is a hardy, deer-resistant perennial that tolerates wide range of soil conditions, lasts several years, and draws butterflies. In Au-

gust 2013 Fine Gardening magazine, catmint varieties were rated on disease resistance, easy growth, and hardiness for USDA Zone 5b. Highest ratings went to blue violet *Nepeta ‘Joanna Reed’*, lavender blue *N. racemosa ‘Walkers Low’*, and lavender blue *N. ‘Six Hills Giant’*.

- Fall-blooming replacement plants for areas of the yard infected with aster yellows where coneflowers, phlox, coreopsis, asters, or black-eyed Susans have to be removed are found in May/June 2013 Northern Gardener magazine. They include: Agastache, ironweed, black cohosh, butterfly weed, cardinal flower, Culver’s root, Joe-Pye weed, Liatris, or sunflowers resistant to aster yellows.

- Most flavorful herbs such as rosemary, thyme and sage are grown in the sandy soils of their origins such as the sun-drenched Mediterranean. Keep water, soil amendments, and fertilizers to a minimum. Trim ends or shoots to use for the most flavor according to March 2013 Martha Stewart Living magazine found at the Yankton Community Library.