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Volunteers Bring Historic Rose Garden Back to Bloom

By Beverly H.

Volunteers have the power to transform their community. As co-founder of *Friends of the San Jose Rose Garden*, I have witnessed how people of all ages and abilities can come together to make a difference, transform neglect into beauty, and inspire change in other communities. In less than two years volunteers, took a historic landmark park from probation to elation. This is our story. Due to budget and staff cuts, the San Jose California Municipal Rose Garden fell into serious disrepair. Built in the 1930s, the 11-acre park features expansive lawns and a five-acre rose garden containing 4,000 rosebushes. Sadly, severe cutbacks led to poor horticultural practices such as using herbicides in the rose beds to control weeds - which also killed the roses. In 2005, the Municipal Rose Garden was at risk of losing national accreditation by the All America Rose Selections and placed on "probation." City officials ignored the letter of probation, and in January 2007 a crisis point was reached. Roses were dead and dying, beds choked with weeds, and only 20% of the Rose Garden was pruned.

Rosarians and community advocates Beverly Rose Hopper and Terry Reilly decided something drastic had to be done. We built public awareness and support through television and newspaper interviews along with rallying support at City Hall, and used slogans such as "Free the Roses" (after all the roses were on probation) and other catchy sound bites. By reaching out to the community through a variety of methods, including the Internet, we discovered people from all over had sentimental connections to the Rose Garden. What started as a neighborhood issue became a regional campaign. In addition we promoted the idea that volunteers could help with park maintenance, because the City of San Jose, at the time, had no framework for such a maintenance program.

In the fall of 2007, Friends of the San Jose Rose Garden was officially launched as a nonprofit volunteer organization in public/private partnership with the City of San Jose. A combination of marketing, improved horticulture, and a two-tiered volunteer program were core to our success, leading to such achievements as pruning 4,000 roses in only 2 hours.

Besides mass volunteer events which attract all ages and abilities, we offer a "Master Volunteer" program - after participating in a training program volunteers receive a distinctive vest emblazoned with our logo, which permits them to clip or weed whenever they choose. Master Volunteers also serve as docents and garden ambassadors.

With 1,000 volunteers in our database, and more than 150 "Master Volunteers," what is the secret to our support? Fresh and innovative marketing, community outreach, an interactive website filled with photos/training videos/news, a companion blog, a Fan page on Facebook, and the cultivation of our volunteers.

We value our volunteers and value the power of recognition. The green vests that distinguish Master Volunteers (MV's) in the garden are key. Volunteers are easily identifiable as someone who belongs. MV's log their hours on our website (5,000 hours in 2009) and for every 10 hours receive a gold star for their vest, and for 100 hours receive a framed Commendation from the City Council. We also know the importance of fun - pizza parties, movie nights, tickets in the City's box for a hockey game or concert, and get-togethers like our "We're Thankful for Our Volunteers" event. In fostering teamwork many new friendships have been formed.

The renovation of the garden (835 new roses planted) was completed in less than 2 years. We implemented new horticultural techniques specifically for public gardens to create masses of blooms. The transformation has been spectacular. In May 2009, the San Jose Municipal Rose Garden received full re-accreditation and was elevated to "Test Garden" status by the All-America Rose Selections (AARS) - one of only 23 Test Gardens in the USA and the only one in Northern California.

Our program has been developed into a "case study" and is being used as a model in other communities, including two others in California: Oakland (Friends of the Morcom Rose Garden) and Sacramento (Friends of the McKinley Parks Rose Garden.)

The San Jose Municipal Rose Garden is attracting visitors from across America. It is the site of picnics and celebrations, and is a peaceful oasis in a hectic world. In these economic times, the importance of parks cannot be understated. Parks serve all the people, providing a place of beauty to lift the spirit and renew the soul.

What Friends of the San Jose Rose Garden achieved is an example of people power: the people who rescued, restored, and revitalized the San Jose Municipal Rose Garden; who took it from "probation to elation" through the sheer power of volunteers.

For more information, visit www.FriendsSJRoseGarden.org

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