

Best kept secret in Mesa: MCC's rose garden offers respite

By **Shelley Ridenour** - March 28, 2017



The rose garden is visible as people pass the Mesa Community College campus on Southern Avenue, just past its intersection with Dobson Road, at 1833 W. Southern Ave. (Sally Mesarosh/Special to MyNewsMesa.com)

Forget all the rumors you've heard about growing roses in Mesa.

They're bunk, a rose expert says.

It's not too hot. It's not too dry. The ground isn't too hard.

Rather, according to Marylou Coffman, Mesa is a prime rose-growing community. And, she's got the gardens to prove it.

Coffman is the curator of the rose garden at



The rose garden is visible as people pass the Mesa Community College

Mesa Community College. She's held that volunteer post for 20 years, since the garden was created by numerous volunteers.

campus on Southern Avenue, just past its intersection with Dobson Road, at 1833 W. Southern Ave. (Sally Mesarosh/Special to MyNewsMesa.com)

"Volunteer" is an important word to Coffman. Essentially everything in the garden is the result of volunteer work or donations. She's proud of that.

"When we started, it was all by donations," Coffman said. "All of the flowers were bought with donations and all the work done by volunteers."



The rose garden at Mesa Community College, 1833 W. Southern Ave. (Sally Mesarosh/Special to MyNewsMesa.com)

Mesa Community College takes care of getting the plants watered. Much of the garden is on the canal flood irrigation system. That's a bonus, Coffman said, because it's critical to the health of a rose bush that it be deep watered. Roses need to be soaked to a depth of 2 feet two or three times a week in the summer and at least once a week during winter, Coffman said.

Rose garden volunteers continue to raise money to expand the drip system that's in place in parts of the garden.



The rose garden at Mesa Community College, 1833 W. Southern Ave. (Sally Mesarosh/Special to MyNewsMesa.com)

"The goal is to get the drip system everywhere," Coffman said. Until then, new plants are supplemented with water from regular hoses and sprinklers.

The most active volunteers, nicknamed "the deadheaders," work year-round deadheading the flowers to keep the bushes healthy. About 50 people are active deadheaders, Coffman said. They're easy to spot in the garden because they proudly wear their "deadheader" T-shirts.

Early every year, the public is invited to help clean up and prep the gardens. Coffman said 250 people joined in for the Jan. 14 pruning day this year.



Other volunteers lead tours of the garden from March through May. People can schedule a tour by calling 480-461-7200. Open group tours are held most weekend mornings at 10, but special tours can be booked.



The rose garden at Mesa Community College, 1833 W. Southern Ave. (Sally Mesarosh/Special to MyNewsMesa.com)

Coffman's always on the lookout for new volunteers. Anyone interested should call her at 480-926-3064.

Now is perfect viewing time

Right now, is the perfect time to visit the garden, Coffman said. Mid-March through the end of May, sometimes into the middle of June, is when the roses really strut their stuff. Big blooms and lovely fragrances await visitors, she said.

The next best season is fall, from late October through early January. The roses bloom from July through September, but Coffman said the extreme heat means smaller blossoms and they don't last long on the stem.

The Mesa garden is one of the largest desert rose gardens in the world, boasting 8,000 roses.

The garden is visible as people pass the MCC campus on Southern Avenue, just past its intersection with Dobson Road. Punch the address of 1833 W. Southern Ave. into your GPS and you'll easily find the garden.

Once you've arrived, park your vehicle and start meandering. Your cellphone can be turned into a self-guided tour map. Signs posted throughout the garden explain how to tune in to the walking tour. Most of the varieties are identified with signs near the base of the plant so people can learn specific names. The signs include the variety name, the date the flower was introduced to the public, its colors and its parentage, along with its American Rose Society rating.

Coffman loves to listen to what people say when they visit the garden.

"When people come to the garden they see their favorite color or rose and they want to know the story," she said, adding that other volunteers are ready to share all those stories.

Likewise, Coffman enjoys watching what visitors do in the garden, whether they

rest on benches scattered throughout the property or wander among the blossoms.

"Students and families eat here, relax here," she said. "You can't come to this garden and not be happy."

Mesa Community College counselor Heidi-Christa Adams, chairwoman of the college's counseling department, agreed that the garden is a restful place.

"I have strolled in the rose garden with students who need to walk and breathe prior to dealing with the self-defeating behaviors of addictions," Adams said. "It's a good way to bring the calmness of nature that serves as the ultimate stress buster into their stressful life."

Coffman rattles off the garden's attributes, noting it is "peaceful, restful, beautiful and educational."

The Mesa garden has long been a test garden for the American Rose Society, Coffman said. Hybridizers develop new rose varieties all the time. Those plants must be tested in multiple environments to see how they grow. Scattered throughout the MCC garden are test plots, identified and dated.

Currently one test garden features a flower dubbed "September mourn" in honor of 9/11.

Test gardens are in place for two years, under near-constant evaluation. Members of the East Valley Rose Society, to which many volunteers belong, help with that effort.

Since the garden sits on a college campus, the test gardens aren't the only education they offer. MCC students practice pruning techniques in the garden. Students in the integrated pest management class look for insects and diseases. Students in the plant identification course study all the garden's trees, MCC sustainable agriculture program Director Peter Condon said.

East Valley Rose Society

East Valley Rose Society members also teach classes on pruning and deadheading in the garden, Coffman said.

Condon agreed with some of Coffman's assessments of the garden, pointing out it also helps beautify the college.

The garden is split into four distinct sections. Section 1 is the veteran's garden.

Coffman lingers long in this section, because there are many tales to tell about all the rose types and the statues on display.

"It's unique in that all the roses have patriotic names," Coffman said. Those rose varieties include "stars and stripes," "bronze star," "Memorial Day," "let freedom ring," "purple heart," "honor," "General George Washington" and "fireworks."

The veteran's garden has five huge circular beds, each adorned by a giant flag representing one of the five branches of military.

"We have to replace the flags every couple of months," Coffman said. Arizona's brutal sun and heat do take a toll on the fabric, but not the flowers.

A statue of famed Arizonan Ernest McFarland highlights the veteran's garden. McFarland was governor, a U.S. senator and chief justice of the Arizona Supreme Court and is largely credited with establishing the G.I. bill.

Another plaque is the Blue Star Memorial, donated by the Arizona Federal of Garden Clubs.

Climbing roses do their thing on trellises in the military section and along the wall that borders part of the sidewalk past the garden. Coffman loves the names of those varieties: "America" "soaring spirit" and "Fourth of July."

Don't miss "Arizona," Coffman said. It's an orange blend flower in the veteran's garden. Its name may be more associated with the USS Arizona than the state, but it's anyone's guess.

In the garden, farthest from the veteran's section lies the peace beds, Coffman said. That section is highlighted by markers that state "may peace prevail on earth," in eight languages.

It's also home to two heart-shaped flower beds that represent love. Other beds represent friendship, beauty and peace.

Visitors to the peace beds will find the pink promise rose that represents breast cancer research.

Coffman doesn't have a single favorite rose. She has a long list of favorites – "veteran's honor," a red flower; "Doris Day," a bright yellow blossom; "falling in love," a perfect shade of pink; "ketchup and mustard," a yellow and red blend; and "sheilab perfume," a stunning peach.

Coffman refers to the rose garden as "the best-kept secret in Maricopa County." She'd like that to change and is hopeful more people will discover the site.

"You get in here and you forget everything else," Coffman said, peeking among the rose bushes.

– Shelley Ridenour is a freelance reporter for MyNewsMesa.com.

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Shelley Ridenour

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