

http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/news/roses-show-off-spring-colors-at-mesa-community-college/article_d76b0382-2e98-11e7-a41c-f72b4b703f5b.html

TOP STORY

Roses show off spring colors at Mesa Community College

By Ralph Zubiata, Tribune Managing Editor May 2, 2017



Kimberly Carrillo/Tribune Staff Photographer

Pasadena has the Rose Bowl and Tournament of Roses Parade. Portland is known as the Rose City. But the Valley is the nation's center for rose bushes, growing 60 percent of the roses sold in the nation.

And now is the key time to take in all those blooms, at the Rose Garden at Mesa Community College, an East Valley showplace for the flowers and the largest rose garden in the Southwest.

“Mother Nature and the Almighty have a deal that they’re going to be glorious for Easter and after,” said Mike Cryer of the Mesa-East Valley Rose Society.

The rose garden was established in 1997 in a partnership between Mesa Community College and the society. It was planted in phases, with the first and second phases planted from 1997 to 2000. Now, with four phases complete, there are nearly 9,000 roses of over 300 varieties.

Cryer has been working with the rose garden for 11 years as a volunteer.

Cryer is a “Deadhead,” which has nothing to do with Jerry Garcia, but instead with flower pruning. Cryer and other volunteers trim the tops off bushes to create fewer but stronger blooms.

In January and February, they cut bushes down to about 3 feet tall and strip off all their leaves.

“That gives them a breather since we don’t have a winter,” Cryer said. “That keeps them from producing a rose hip.”

Rose hips are the fruit of rose bushes. Growers don’t want rose hips because they keep the plant from flowering again, and they take a lot of effort to grow.

The desert heat and sun is ideal for roses, and the plants bloom in April, May and June. With careful tending, they bloom again in October, November and December.

Steve Sheard, chairman of the board of the Rose Society, also enjoys the desert heat. He’s originally from the African nation of Zimbabwe. He left Africa to work with Motorola in London, then got transferred to Arizona in 1978. After he got sent back to London, he let his bosses know he’d love to go back to Arizona.

“Zimbabwe was sunny and hot. Arizona is sunny and hot. England was cold and damp,” he said. “Guess which I’d prefer.”

After settling in with Motorola in the East Valley, he planted some rose bushes at his house “I planted 20, and 18 died,” he said. “Being an engineer, that was not acceptable.”

He learned all he could about roses and now has 120 plants at home. He also grows all manner of fruit trees, such as papaya, fig, guava and of course citrus.

At one point, Sheard competed in rose shows. “Once you’ve competed and you get your first blue ribbon, you’re hooked,” he said.

But he doesn’t really have the time to devote anymore.

“Now I compete to make the others look good.”

The MCC rose garden’s flowers all have stories and famous or amusing names attached. You’ll find Bob Hope, Ronald Reagan, Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, Coretta Scott King and Neil Diamond. Also, Let Freedom Ring, Marmalade Skies, Sunshine Daydream, Over the Moon, Whimsy, Candyland and Drop Dead Red.

Some of the roses are legitimate pieces of history.

One group of purple roses are called the McCormick Rose.

Margaret Hunt McCormick, wife of the second Arizona territorial governor, Richard C. McCormick, had a clipping from a New Jersey rose bush taken by steamship around South America all the way to Los Angeles.

There, the clipping was taken by stagecoach to the territorial capital of Prescott to be planted at the Governor’s Mansion. The Mesa rose garden got a clipping from that bush in 2004.

Despite all care that flowering plants would seem to need in the harsh desert, Sheard says it’s not that hard to grow roses.

“Roses are like teenagers,” he said. “They eat anything and a lot of it. They’re never not hungry.”

Sheard says the roses at MCC don’t take any special additives or treatments.

“We don’t do anything but wash them. They only need fertilizer. Just feed them.”

Sheard talks about expanding the rose garden further, maybe adding fruit trees and a shop.

“The president of MCC talks about the Rose Garden at MCC. Ultimately, it’s going to become MCC at the Rose Garden,” Sheard jokes.

The Rose Garden, at 1833 W. Southern Ave., Mesa, is open to the public every day of the year at no charge.

– Contact Ralph Zubiate at 480-898-6825 or rzubiate@timespublications.com.