

Zone 4

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Summer 2013 · No. 18

**FOR ALL
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growing perfect peaches
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Display until August 31, 2013
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The lush park-like lawn near the garden's entrance is bordered by perennial flowerbeds, with a gazebo, benches, and picnic tables creating a welcoming outdoor space that is the perfect spot for a picnic, family gatherings, outdoor concerts, and community and private events. Perennial beds in this area contain many of Betty's favorite sedums, lupines, daylilies, monkshood, and columbines.

Jackson's Garden

Where sharing abundance is second nature

Rilla Esbjornson | Text · Beth Bridgers Johns | Photography

Driving northeast out of Sheridan, Montana to Jackson's Garden in Southwest Montana's Ruby Valley, Mill Creek Road soon turns to dirt. Expansive wheat fields, ranchland, mountains, and sky dominate the landscape. Cottonwoods and lush undergrowth line Mill Creek's riparian edges. Even if you knew what you were looking for, you might drive past and have to turn around to find the garden, which is surrounded by a 6-foot tall deer- and moose-proof fence. The gate is always unlocked; the fence is in place to keep out the critters that would love to raid the garden, not folks interested in enjoying the garden. If you visit, simply pull the gate closed when you come in and when you leave.

GROWING A COMMUNITY

A core-group of eight community-service minded members and volunteers maintains Jackson's Garden, a 501(c)3 non-profit located on 8.5 acres. When we visited Jackson's Garden last July, board members Linda Day, Janet Marsh, and Carla and Paul Marsh shared their labor of love and generosity with us. Rather than growing gardens in town or dividing the property up into smaller plots for



Jackson's Garden Board Members Janet Marsh, Linda Day, and Carla and Paul Marsh help make this a very special place where community service thrives. Irises, sweet peas, Nicotiana, black-eyed Susans, and blanket flowers flourish in the raised bed behind them. On the other side of the fence, several varieties of squash grow, including spaghetti, hubbard, kabocha, and 'acorn'.

community members to use, the board has chosen a different model, growing a 2-acre vegetable and flower garden, which members and volunteers maintain together, in exchange for a share of what is produced.

Abundant wildlife makes growing a garden in the Sheridan area difficult. Linda, board president and Production Committee chair



A 6-foot tall deer- and moose-proof fence, to keep the critters out, surrounds Jackson's Garden. The gate is always unlocked—if you visit simply close the gate when you enter and leave.



A small pond with a miniature millwheel (built by a Sheridan community member) adds to the garden's charm.

said, “The deer, raccoons, skunks, rabbits, and rock chucks, come in—so that’s how it [the garden] started, with a nice deer-proof fence. This garden is more protected and makes it possible for the garden members to grow a lot more produce than they could in their own yards.”

The garden provides each member with plenty of food from the wide variety of vegetable and fruit crops grown. They share the extra abundance with the Sheridan Food Pantry and Senior Lunch Program, as well as sell vegetables at the Sheridan Farmer’s Market. Proceeds from market sales go back into maintaining the garden and providing community education programs for adults and children. Linda said that in 2012, “We donated over 300 pounds of produce to the Sheridan Senior Center and we gave out weekly \$5 vouchers to clients of the local food bank.” The group sold over \$2,015 worth of vegetables at their farm stand and had \$376 in sales to local restaurants.

Garden volunteers also maintain an old hoop-house for starting plants and a high-tunnel, purchased through the U.S. Department of Agriculture NRCS grant, for season extension, as well as a small apple orchard. Working with the Montana

Conservation Corp, they’ve restored streamside habitat and developed a half-mile nature trail. A small pond with a miniature millwheel (built by a Sheridan community member) adds to the garden’s charm. They’ve also developed a lush park-like lawn area near the garden’s entrance, bordered by perennial flowerbeds, with a gazebo, benches, and picnic tables creating a welcoming outdoor space that is the perfect spot for a picnic, family gatherings, outdoor concerts, and community and private events.



Photo: Chris McKeever

Bing and Betty Jackson loved sharing their garden with the Sheridan, Montana community. Their generosity, with Bing’s gift of the property, after Betty’s death, helped create Jackson’s Garden as a 501(c)3 non-profit community-service based garden.

MEET THE JACKSONS

Generosity is at the heart of Jackson’s Garden. Long-time Sheridan resident Les “Bing” Jackson donated this property to the non-profit in 2010, in memory of his wife, Betty. Bing and Betty, who were passionate about flower gardening, purchased this property in 1972 from Glen Marsh (Board Vice-President, Janet’s grandfather), with hopes of building a home there; instead, they created a garden.

Bing and Betty taught school in Sheridan for many years and were deeply involved in the community. They loved sharing their garden. After Betty died in 2002, the garden became too much for Bing to care for. The

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This old-fashioned cider press is used during the very popular annual October community cider-pressing event.



The Montana Conservation Corps and garden volunteers created a half-mile nature trail as part of their Mill Creek stream habitat restoration project.



The Kids Club planted this Native American heritage garden with heirloom seeds and advice from John Austin.

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garden's website (<https://sites.google.com/site/jacksonsgardeninc/>) tells more of the story: "In 2005, Bing's friends Frank and Chris McKeever volunteered to help him reclaim a bit of what had become a jungle of weeds and brush. The next year, more people joined the effort, and by 2008 the informal efforts of a few friends had returned the garden to much of its former glory." Several board members, who benefited from the Jacksons' influence as children, young people, and adults, decided it was time to give back to the Jacksons and the Sheridan community. Linda said, "We have some members who just do it out of the love of the space and the idea of Mr. Jackson. They were like everyone's other mom and dad, and a lot of the people do this work just for the love of those people."

Paul chairs the Grounds and Equipment Committee and is the resident handyman. He said, "Bing was a neighbor when I was a little kid, plus a baker who gave us day-old rolls and bread, and he was my Little League and Babe Ruth coach, and my 7th grade teacher, friend, mentor, and all around good guy. It's a way to give back to him."

RESTORATION AND EDUCATION

Carla, a Montana Master Gardener who chairs the Ornamental Committee, has done extensive work restoring and expanding the flower gardens. She's maintained Betty's Sedum collection and favorite heirloom perennials on the property. There are plans to expand the perennial gardens, especially in the shady areas of the property.

Janet said, "I'm not a gardener. I work more with the education program and finding grants—that is my contribution." Her skills, along with research assistance from a VISTA volunteer, and another volunteer who writes grants for the organization, made it possible for the garden to participate in a cost-sharing partnership with the USDA National Resource Conservation Services (NRCS) in order to purchase their high-tunnel, which moves on rails. The high-tunnel provides a jump-start on the growing season and protects crops when they are at most risk for frost-damage. When the first crop is harvested, the tunnel is rolled to another section, allowing for



The garden's high-tunnel was purchased through a cost-sharing partnership with the USDA National Resource Conservation Services (NRCS). 'Floriani Red Flint', 'Bodacious', and 'Bicolor' corn; 60-70 tomato plants, including 'Early Girl', 'Prairie Fire', 'Sungold'; and a number of cucumber varieties flourished in the high-tunnel when we visited. Contoured terraced beds near the high-tunnel hold potatoes, 'Provider' and 'Blue Lake' bush beans, sunflowers, 'Danvers' and 'Nantes' carrots, lettuces, kale, and other vegetable crops.

succession planting and growing crops that need warmer conditions during the course of the season.

The non-profit also received a \$10,000 Montana DRNC (Department of Natural Resources) grant to improve their irrigation system. The Alternative Energy Resource Organization (AERO; see www.aeromt.org) and Dick Pohl, a retired Montana State University landscape architect, have helped develop the garden's long-term site plan. The garden hosts young people who want to learn more about gardening as interns with AmeriCorps (www.americorps.gov/) and WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms; www.woof.org).



Carla continues to restore Betty's flower beds throughout the garden. This area contains Asiatic lilies, dahlias, candytuft, cleomes, hollyhocks, peonies, poppies, spirea, spotted lungwort, and other perennials, with marigolds and other annuals mixed in.

The Kids Club began the summer of 2012 with an \$800 grant from the Turner Foundation, and meets every other week during the summer. The children voted on what to plant, designed and planted the children's garden, and enjoyed gardening, food awareness, and environmental education programs throughout the summer. They've also grown a Mandan-Hidatsa-style heritage garden with advise and seeds from John Austin [for more information about John's work with Native American gardening, see "Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden," Zone 4, No.6—Ed.].

In the fall, the Kids Club entered produce at the Madison County fair and, according to the garden's website they "received 19 blue ribbons, purple ribbons for best perennial and superintendent's choice, and several red and a couple of white ribbons." The garden is also developing programs in conjunction with the Sheridan elementary school, and this past December hosted a "Feed the Birds Christmas Party," which was a great success.

Adult volunteer gardeners learn about gardening sustainably in the Sheridan area, food security issues, and food preservation techniques. The annual cider-pressing community event in October is always a hit. Janet said, "I think the garden really provides a unique opportunity for the community—that it's a community project, makes it a unique garden."

To learn more about Jackson's Garden and their summer and fall community events, see <https://sites.google.com/site/jacksonsgardeninc/home> or contact Linda Day at 406-842-5678. The garden is located at 125 Mill Creek Road, Sheridan, Montana. 🍷

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