

# Heritage Gardens Certified at Master Gardener Ahtanum Youth Park Demonstration Garden

By Debra Kroon

Many in our community are already aware of the beautiful Yakima County WSU Master Gardener Demonstration Gardens on the grounds of the Ahtanum Youth Park, Union Gap. The City of Union is an important Yakima County WSU Master Gardener community partner. The gardens were established in 2005 and have grown into unique garden venues, such as a children's garden, an English garden, a dahlia bed, woods walk, a composting area, and much more, all on about an acre of land.

Several Master Gardeners began in 2022 to plan three designated areas in which to create gardens that truly showcase native plants in their native habitat. A primary goal was to showcase plants growing in the surrounding geographical area. The planners also sought to include plants without excessive water needs and thus reduce the garden's water dependence. The gardeners brainstormed the process of converting high-maintenance, water consuming non-native beds into low-maintenance native beds.



To ensure they achieved their goals, they reached out to the folks at the Heritage Gardens Program. The program was created by the Benton Conservation District in partnership with the Columbia Basin Chapter of the Washington Native Plant Society. Supported by North Yakima Conservation District, South Yakima Conservation District, and with funding from the State of Washington Department of Ecology and the Yakima Basin Integrated Plan's Municipal Subgroup, the program promotes the use of native plants, low water-use landscaping, and efficient irrigation methods. The Heritage Gardens Program also

educates the community about the history and biodiversity of the Columbia River Basin.

With the help of the Heritage Gardens Program's Director Kelsey Kelmel and Heritage Garden Representative for Benton, Franklin and Yakima Counties Kelsi Potterf, the gardeners developed a plan for each of the three gardens: Dryland Desert/Semi-Desert; Transitional Semi-Desert/Foothills/Riparian; and Foothills/Montaine/Riparian. Development was no small task, requiring participants to secure new plant material, rework irrigation, and remove and relocate original plantings. To qualify for certification as Heritage Gardens, each bed needed to incorporate flora native to our area, along with species mentioned in the journals of Meriwether Lewis. Additionally, geologic history



needed to be included. Since basalt flows were among the geologic features of the Columbia River Basin, these gardeners chose to incorporate basalt.



It was important for our gardeners to create a demonstrable garden which showcased water conservation and sustainable gardening practices. When the decision was made to convert these gardens, we knew that it would not be a quick turnaround. Native plants are best transplanted in the fall. They have a long tap root, which helps them to withstand low water availability. Obtaining plant material takes time. There is also the risk that not everything you plant will make it through that first winter. That was the case in some of our gardens. While two

years may seem like a long time to convert garden beds, finding native plants is not as easy as running to your local big-box store. The North Yakima Conservation District gave the project a significant head start by donating several appropriate species for the gardens. The gardeners sourced plantings from Tapteal Native Plants in West Richland and Derby Canyon Natives in Peshastin.



September 22 was a significant day in the Demonstration Gardens as several Master Gardeners convened around the three native beds as Kemel certified Bed 1 and Bed 3 as Heritage Gardens. She presented both beds with a beautiful sign designating them as Heritage Gardens, as well as plant signs for the many species growing in each of those beds. Bed 2 is still a

work in progress but is well on its way to being certified in 2024. Unwanted plant material has been removed, and new native species have been installed.

Yakima County WSU Master Gardeners invites the community to come out and visit the garden on the grounds of the Ahtanum Youth Park, just west of the Big Red Barn. Take time to stroll through the gardens and be sure to make your way to the three Heritage Gardens in the middle.

Heritage Gardens are here to help you. For more information go to <https://www.hgcd.info/>

WSU Yakima County Master Gardener Program's website may be found at <http://extension.wsu.edu/yakima/>