



A plaque half-hidden in the Memorial & Habitat Garden pays homage to Air Force Maj. Albert Lauer, father of Becky Montgomery, at the native garden Montgomery co-founded in the Santa Rosa Rural Cemetery.
(JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat)

Memorial garden a sanctuary for native plants and creatures

By MEG McCONAHEY
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT
May 23, 2014

It was in early September 2001 that Becky Montgomery, Linda Ross and a two other volunteers began work on the garden.

Within the half-wild expanse of Santa Rosa's old Rural Cemetery, dedicated to the departed, they envisioned their habitat garden as a little affirmation of life, vibrant with blooming shrubs, buzzing bees and butterflies. Here people, perhaps those without graves to visit, could place engraved stones in memory of loved ones.

But quickly, it became something more.

Two weeks after they selected the perfect spot in a sunny area at the bottom of the hill, just beyond the Franklin Avenue gate, the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 occurred, changing everything.

"We all just agreed that this garden will be our affirmation of life," said Montgomery, a retired teacher. "This will be our way of showing we have faith in the future."

The process of preparing the ground and putting in those first plants also proved therapeutic.

"Everybody was so traumatized," remembered Ross, a longtime English instructor at Santa Rosa Junior College. "It was just healing to be in this beautiful space and planting stuff."

They worked through their feelings as they worked the soil. Now, 13 years later, the garden is an endearing racket of native California plants. It serves not just as a memorial garden but as an exuberant affirmation that life goes on.

It can be found next to the familiar Cannonball Memorial, erected a century ago to honor veterans. About five modest memorial stones have so far been placed, half-hidden amid the carpenteria, salvias, phacelias and ceanothus like Easter eggs waiting to be discovered by anyone who walks slowly and looks down.

Among them is a stone to Montgomery's father, Albert Lauer, an Air Force major who disappeared off the coast of Guam in 1958. Beside it she has planted native dogwood and wild strawberries, because he loved strawberries. In spring, irises burst out in blue, his favorite color.

This is also a demonstration garden, showing the raw beauty of natives that have adapted to thrive with little help.

Each plant, from essential milkweed that provides larval food for monarch butterflies to a whole alley of ribes that produce flowers and berries, is marked with both its botanical and its common name. So as visitors walk through on a winding path created by Eagle Scouts, they can go window shopping, making note of plants they might like to seek out for their own gardens.

The efforts to make this a stopping point and sanctuary for birds, bees, insects, butterflies and even little lizards has earned it certification as a Monarch Waystation and as a Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation.

Montgomery, a member of the California Native Plant Society, buys most of the plants from specialty nurseries like Cal Flora in Santa Rosa and Mostly Natives in Tomales, as well as the fall plant sale put on by the Milo Baker chapter of the Native Plant Society, scheduled for Oct. 11 this year.

She selects plants specifically for their value as nectar or habitat for butterflies, birds, hummingbirds and native bees.

There is the native *Verbena lilacina*, with its lilac-colored flowers that attract spiders and butterflies; *Grindelia*, or gum plant, with its daisy-like flowers; an alley of ribes with small spring flowers of pink, red and purple; and *Mimulus aurantiacus*, or sticky monkeyflower, which attracts a host of pollinators as well as provides larval food for Chalcedon Checkerspot and Common Buckeye butterflies.

"We do all our planting after the second or third rain in the fall," said the jovial and down-to-earth Montgomery, who strives not for well-groomed order but for a garden that mimics nature, with a slightly disheveled look that allows for plenty of shade and protective cover for critters. The volunteer team, which also includes retired teacher and longtime rancher Jean McMullen, trims only what is necessary.

During the warmer season, working on Friday mornings, they hand-water sparingly and weed. Their only mulch is the fallen leaves and cuttings, just as nature designed. Set throughout the garden are water bowls for birds and bees and houses for bluebirds and titmice.

Garden co-founder Ross said it's a very peaceful place to while away her time.

"There's a sweet spirit here," she said. "It's a sacred space."