



William Rapaport <wjrapaport@gmail.com>

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Kendrick Lake park a xeric wonder

Author: Jodi Torpey

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When city of Lakewood horticulture manager Greg Foreman inherited the park at Kendrick Lake in 2002, there were three garden beds and an acre of dead turf. But instead of seeing the park as half empty, he saw the opportunity to design drought-tolerant gardens to promote the benefits of planting

native and xeric plants.

The fact the gardens have become one of the premier Xeriscape demonstration gardens in the state confirms his original vision.

"We have the most unique opportunity to define a whole new landscape style," Foreman says. "We live in a naturalistic environment, and it needs a naturalistic design."

Foreman and his crew have created lush, dryland gardens guaranteed to change the way people think about gardening in a semi-arid climate.

The gardens demonstrate the diversity of plant material growing in the Rocky Mountain region. When small white alpine flowers mingle easily with spiny cacti and strawberries sit near a carpet of ice plants, it shows how well these different species can get along in the garden.

It's interesting to stroll through the gardens any time of the year, but in midsummer, each bed provides a spectacular display of nearly every color, texture and flower found from the mountains to the plains.

Foreman says he designed the gardens to represent the different plant palettes found in each of Colorado's elevational zones. He combined familiar native plants with those from similar climates found in other regions of the world.

The 10 beds feature more than 350 species of plants found growing in the plains, foothills, Great Basin, montane and alpine zones. Some of the beds hold only the plants growing in that zone, while others mix and match from several zones.

A winding gravel path leads visitors to close-up views of the uniquely Western landscape that includes the brilliant yellow plumes of showy goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*), dark red prairie coneflowers (*Ratibida columnifera* "Mexican Hat") and stunning purple Russian sage (*Perovskia*). Large boulders are perfectly placed to mimic the topography of higher elevational zones.

Try this at home

His advice for gardeners who want to recreate the look of the Kendrick Lake gardens is to boldly dig in and feel free to make mistakes. He says plants can always be moved to another spot in the garden.

Even though it's the colorful blooms that attract the most attention, the key to a beautiful drought-tolerant garden begins with the hard work of preparing the soil.

Foreman says it was a trial-and-error process that finally led to creating a successful mixture of amended top soil, sand, compost and small gravel called squeegee. This combination provides the kind of drainage xeric plants need.

"You can't have too much drainage for Western plants," he says. "They like a highly mineralized soil. It goes against everything people have been told about adding compost to the soil."

After the garden design was on paper, Foreman's staff ripped out the sod, brought in squeegee and worked it deeply into the existing soil. Then they added the special topsoil mixture and built the beds up slowly. Pop-up spray heads were placed around the bed edges for irrigation.

One of the planting techniques Foreman used also goes against conventional planting advice. The crew prepared the finished beds by mulching them with three kinds of rock before digging the planting holes. Not only did this speed up planting, but when rocks fell into the holes it improved drainage to keep plants from drowning during periods of excessive precipitation.

Plant Select in the landscape

Many of the plants found in the gardens are from the Plant Select program, including sunset foxglove (*Digitalis obscura*), winecups (*Callirhoe involucrata*), sunset hyssop (*Agastache rupestris*) and Mojave sage (*Salvia pachyphylla*). Thanks to Foreman's lobbying efforts, the Lakewood City Council selected Mojave sage as the official city plant in 2009.

Plant Select has recognized the Gardens at Kendrick Lake with a golden shovel and a Garden Partner award for Excellence in Design, Vision and Educational Outreach. It was also named a showcase garden for its exceptional artistic design and diverse plant palette.

"When we took over the garden in 2002 there was a serious drought, and the parks were on serious water restrictions," he says. "That presented us with an opportunity to educate both the city and the public to get onboard with new and different plants.

Foreman says the inspiration for his innovative garden designs comes directly from Mother Nature. "I'm fortunate to be obsessed with plants," he says. "Whenever I'm out in nature, I'm either observing them or taking photographs of them.

"So much goes into creating plant combinations, like texture, heights, colors, bloom times," he says. "It comes out of my head and onto the page."

Some of Foreman's favorite designs combine desert-adapted plants such as agave, cacti and yucca with a succulent groundcover like an ice plant.

"It's a juxtaposition that you wouldn't see in nature," he says, "but it works."

Read more of Jodi Torpey's writings at westerngardeners.com.

Greg Foreman's favorite plants

The Gardens at Kendrick Lake are located on West Jewell Avenue between Wadsworth Boulevard and Kipling Parkway in Lakewood and are open daily sunrise to sunset. Here are Greg Foreman's favorite plants in each of the elevational zones:

Plains: *Amorpha canescens* (leadplant); *Artemisia versicolor* (seafoam sage); *Chrysothamnus nauseosus* x *nauseosus* (dwarf rabbitbrush); *Liatris ligulistylus* (meadow blazing star); *Oenothera macrocarpa* ssp. *fremontii* (Fremont's primrose)

Foothills: *Antennaria dioica* (pussytoes); *Cercocarpus intricatus* (littleleaf mountain mahogany); *Chrysothamnus nauseosus* (rabbitbrush); *Penstemon pinifolius* (pine leaf beardtongue); *Schizachryum scoparium* (little bluestem grass)

Great Basin: *Acer grandidentatum* (Rocky Mountain big tooth maple); *Agastache rupestris* (sunset hyssop); *Agave parryi* (Parry's agave); *Cupressus arizonica glabra* (Arizona cypress); *Salvia pachyphylla* (Mojave sage); *Scrophularia macrantha* (red birds in a tree)

Montane: *Amelanchier alnifolia* (regent serviceberry); *Aquilegia caerulea* (Colorado columbine); *Arctostaphylos* x *coloradoensis* (mock berry manzanita); *Epilobium fleischeri* (alpine willowherb); *Holodiscus dumosus* (rock spirea)

Alpine: *Acantholimon hohenackeri* (prickly dianthus); *Aquilegia flabellata* (fan columbine); *Delosperma* ``Lesotho"; *Festuca mairei* (Atlas Mountain fescue); *Hirpicum armeriodes* var. *armeriodes* (grassleaf mat daisy); *Lewisia cotyledon* ``Heikneri Strain" (bitter root)

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