

Drought stalls upgrades at bird, butterfly garden

Survival mode: Atlanta's Freedom Park volunteers work to keep existing plants alive.

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This fall should have been a time of joy at Freedom Park's Bird and Butterfly Garden.

Visitors should be enjoying the beauty of thriving native plants and the wildlife they attract. Volunteers should be busy with the year's major seasonal planting. There were plans for an expansion that would increase the garden's size by more than 35 percent.

But Georgia's record drought and resulting watering restrictions have turned joy into disappointment and concern. The annual fall planting has been canceled. The expansion — approved just weeks ago by Atlanta's parks department — has been delayed. And all volunteer efforts are focused on keeping existing plants alive.

Carol Vanderschaff is volunteer coordinator for the garden. She and a handful of compatriots have their hands full trying to maintain the habitat.

"Native plants are relatively drought-resistant and should be self-sustaining," she said. "We're so far behind with rainfall, though, we've had to start watering by hand."

Until recently that meant using water provided by a generous neighbor across the street.

"Neighbors have been extremely helpful," says Vanderschaff, "but with the total watering ban, the only option left is gray water."

Vanderschaff and three fellow volunteers collect the "used" water at their homes and haul it to the garden a few times each week to provide some relief to the tired, thirsty plants that create a vital wildlife habitat. The garden sits on 2,500 square feet of park land near the corner of North Avenue and Candler Park Drive, in the shadow of Mary Lin Elementary School. It is collaboratively run by the DeKalb Master Gardeners Association, the Atlanta Audubon Society and the Freedom Park Conservancy with the blessing of the city's parks department and through a formal agreement with Park Pride.

Vanderschaff and Phil Edwards, president of the DeKalb Master Gardeners Association, are the driving forces behind the garden. Their shared vision was to transform a portion of the park that had become an ivy- and kudzu-covered trash dump into a showcase for native Georgia plants and a haven for birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

"This was a way for us to take a place that had become an eyesore and turn it into something positive," Edwards said. "The site we chose not only has the right amount of sun and shade, but it also lets us cultivate community involvement and include an educational aspect for the kids at Mary Lin."

They started in the fall of 2004 by clearing the land of trash and invasive plants. There was an initial planting in spring 2005 and a larger one in the fall of that year.

Students from Mary Lin helped with the plantings. Georgia Tech students assisted in using existing stone to form small walls in the former driveways of homes torn down for what was supposed to have been a new expressway. The walls prevent further erosion as well as further trash dumping.

More plants were added in 2006, along with a birdbath, a bluebird box, a low fence to protect the plants from people and maintenance crews, and a sign identifying the garden.

Additional improvements are in the offing. Vanderschaff plans to put signs by each plant telling its name and how it fits into the habitat. The conservancy has asked the city to install a water spigot and has offered to pay the monthly water bill. And plants have already been purchased for installation in the additional 900 square feet of space the city's told them they can use.

"The plants are in pots right now and we're using gray water to keep them irrigated until we decide it's time to put them in the ground," said Edwards.

Vanderschaff said they can use all the help they can get to keep the garden viable during the drought.

Anyone interested in helping to collect gray water and irrigate the garden should contact Vanderschaff at 404-373-0295 or by e-mail at carovan@mindspring.com.