

Flower power

Saving native wildflowers is the goal of local volunteers

Special to the Examiner

Volunteer Edmonton

It's hard to believe that at one time the prairies surrounding Edmonton were blossoming with wildflowers.

But with the breaking of the prairie for homesteads and the seeding of grain, "the plants are quite rare because the habitat no longer exists," says Cherry Dodd, one of four co-founders of the Edmonton Naturalization Group.

ENG was formed in 2000 with the amalgamation of the Thistle Group and the Save Little Mountain Group.

Little Mountain, located at 50 Street and 160 Avenue, was at one time a rich natural area with woods and prairie, but development put an end to that.

"We realized we couldn't save the area, but we could save the plants," says Dodd.

The City of Edmonton donated land at the Old Man Creek Nursery north of Sherwood Park, which has allowed ENG to start a nursery.

There are 100 species of native wildflowers there, but that's not even half of what used to grow naturally in the area.

Seeds collected from wildflowers, which are rescued from areas that are under development in the city, are planted here (as well as in Dodd's south side Edmonton yard).

Seeds are further harvested and then distributed to sites within the city as well as schoolyards. The seeds are also sold as fundraisers, and Bedrock Seed Bank and Arch Greenhouse are working with ENG to sell wildflowers.

"It's about encouraging planting," says Diana Baragar, another founding member of ENG.

Its goal is to preserve native plants with their genetic diversity by expanding their use on both public and private landscaping.

There are many advantages to planting wildflowers. Because they are indigenous to the area, they require very little care.

The majority of native wildflowers are perennials. Some self-seed and others put out runners, but the spread of most is easily controlled by thinning. Once established, they are low care.

And they come in many colours and sizes. The late summer nursery is scattered with purples, blues, pinks, yellows, oranges and varying shades of green.

The nursery contains trial plots for the City of Edmonton and County of Strathcona, both of which are growing wildflowers to determine how

well they grow without being watered or weeded.

ENG is an informal volunteer organization, says

Dodd. There is no chairperson or secretary. There is a treasurer and this year a volunteer co-ordinator was hired on the strength of a lottery board grant.

Volunteers range in age from three to 83, both men and women, and there are even a few dogs.

Volunteers can help out with weeding, seed collecting

and mulching at the nursery or with a number of other projects such as thistle patrol, the restoration project at Whitemud Creek, or at the demonstration flower bed at the John Janzen Nature Centre on a weekly basis, once a month or whenever they have some time available.

Both Dodd and Baragar are self-taught gardeners. "You don't need experience. There's always someone experienced ready to help out."

To volunteer, e-mail engvolunteer@gmail.com.

Evelyn Pham, Volunteer Edmonton communications coordinator can be reached at epham@volunteeredmonton.com or by calling 780-732-6655.

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- Cherry Dodd, Edmonton Naturalization Group

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