

## **A Love for the Land: The First Thirty Years of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum**

Jim Locklear

Folks who live in Nebraska—“the home of *Arbor Day*”—usually recognize that an *arboretum* has something to do with trees. Certainly the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum is about trees; we were established in 1978 as a public/private partnership between the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources and the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, Inc., a nonprofit membership organization, to create arboretums across the state where a variety of trees would be planted, tested and enjoyed.

But the founders of NSA had even bigger things in mind. Surprisingly, the word “tree” does not appear at all in our articles of incorporation. Instead the founders used the much more expansive word “flora,” which encompasses all kinds of plants—trees, shrubs, vines, wildflowers, grasses, etc. Intended or not, this word choice was profoundly appropriate because, whether in the wild or in cultivation, trees grow best in the context of other plants, that is, in communities of plants.

And, we have discovered, so do people.

What began 30 years ago as an effort of a small group of plant enthusiasts has evolved into a coalition of community builders, environmental stewards and others who love the land, whether it be the pristine prairies of the sandhills, or a schoolyard in a challenging urban neighborhood.

### **Taking the Arboretum to the People**

Leave it to Nebraskans to come up with a populist approach to public horticulture.

The conditions that affect the growth of trees and other plants vary tremendously across this state. Think of the differences between Brownville, tucked into the forested folds of the Missouri River valley in southeast Nebraska, and Alliance, plunked down on the High Plains of the panhandle. Annual precipitation, length of growing season, winter temperatures, elevation, wind, humidity, soil chemistry—these things and more affect plant survival and growth. You can grow magnolias in Brownville, but you’ll have better luck with buffalograss in Alliance.

And therein lies the impetus behind NSA—the simple fact that most people are not content with buffalograss. We love trees, and when you live in prairie country you have to *plant* trees. Yet the average person doesn’t have the luxury of time or resources to plant a bunch of trees and then wait to see what lives. That’s what an arboretum is for.

It was apparent to the founders of NSA that an arboretum in Brownville would have little relevance to a person in Alliance, and the result was the groundbreaking concept of a *statewide* arboretum. They would take the arboretum to the people, dispersed in communities across the state, making it both accessible and relevant.

The first affiliate site of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum was Arbor Lodge in Nebraska City, famous as the former estate of J. Sterling Morton, the founder of *Arbor Day*. Today, NSA is a network of 86 arboretums, historic landscapes and other public gardens located in 50 host communities across the state. Ironically, or maybe poetically, one of our most recent affiliates is the Kimball Community Arboretum. Located at opposite ends of the state, one developed on the estate of a wealthy businessman, the other on the grounds of the county fair, there could hardly be two more different places in Nebraska. Yet each arboretum serves as a place of beauty, education and inspiration in its community.

### **Plants for the Plains**

Thomas Jefferson is famously quoted as saying, “The greatest service a man may do for his country is the introduction of a useful plant.” He wrote an acquaintance that after he returned to Monticello from his stint in the White House, “...I believe I shall become a florist.”

Jefferson would have loved the NSA GreatPlants® program. A partnership between NSA and the Nebraska Nursery & Landscape Association, the GreatPlants® for the Great Plains program has introduced 26 new trees, shrubs and wildflowers into commercial nursery production, making them available to Nebraska landscapers and gardeners. The program emphasizes plants that are native to (occur naturally in) this region, not only because they are hardy and require less water to grow, but because they bring a “sense of place” to the landscape. We’ve come to call this the “Nebraska Style”—an approach to landscaping that reflects the unique beauty and character of the native plant communities of the state, from the oak woodlands of eastern Nebraska to the ponderosa pine savannas of the Pine Ridge to the several types of prairie communities in between.

### **Every Town a Garden**

The vision of NSA has expanded over the years from tree-planting to garden-making. Beginning in the mid-1980s with a partnership with the Peter Kiewit Foundation of Omaha, NSA began making matching grants available for public landscaping projects. A nearly continuous stream of grant funds have been available since, involving other valued partners including the Nebraska Forest Service, the Nebraska Department of Roads and the Nebraska Environmental Trust. The projects implemented with these funds typically involve trees, but also often include beds of shrubs and sweeps of wildflowers and grasses.

Looking back, the statistics are rather staggering. Since 1986, over \$7 million in matching grants has been delivered through these partnerships to more than 250 Nebraska communities for public landscaping projects involving parks, schools, libraries, courthouses, hospitals, museums, fairgrounds, business districts and other places important to community life. Conserving water in the landscape plus reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers have become important aims, making these landscapes environmentally and economically sustainable.

The total value of these projects is now approaching \$15 million, but that is not the most moving aspect of this body of work. Space does not allow me to recount landfills turned into parks, railroad sidings converted to arboretums, historic but weathered cemeteries renewed and a host of other compelling stories. And magnifying all of this good is the ripple effect many of these nearly 900 public landscaping projects have had throughout their communities, setting a positive tone for subsequent civic improvements. Nebraska communities face many challenges today. Beautiful, sustainable public landscapes won’t solve all of the problems, but they help make our communities more livable and viable.

These stories are representative of the nearly 900 public landscaping projects NSA has helped bring to fruition across the state—good, green work that has earned national admiration. In June NSA received the 2008 Urban Beautification Award from American Horticultural Society in recognition of “significant contributions to urban horticulture and the beautification of American cities,” presented at the Great American Gardeners Awards Ceremony in Washington D.C.

### **Being Kind to Small Places**

Many people are first drawn to NSA because of a love for plants and beautiful landscapes, but they eventually see plants as the means, rather than the end. Every arboretum created, every aging park renewed, every schoolyard made shadier, every nursing home made more inviting, is an act of kindness. And given the demographics of Nebraska, most of these are *small* acts of kindness, at least in terms of scale and scope. Kentucky farmer-poet Wendell Berry has

suggested that a truly good society is one that it is “kind to small places.” A lot of trees have been planted and landscapes created over the past 30 years, but the more stirring story of the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum is the multitude of small places that have been made even more beautiful and even more humane because this organization exists.