

Xeriscaping ideas take root

A patchwork of drought-resistant plants around The Hangar Fitness and Wellness Centre marks a sustainability precedent at UBC's Okanagan campus. The small but significant xeriscaping job inaugurates the Campus as a Living Lab ad-hoc committee.

Led by Keith Culver, Director of the Okanagan Sustainability Institute, the committee focused on the Living Lab objectives to enable teaching and learning opportunities through collaborative efforts and at the same time identifying native plants for optimal ecological function. The committee, using the knowledge of local xeriscape expert Gwen Steele, made its recommendations to UBC's campus architecture team.

Steele, the executive director of the Okanagan Xeriscape Association and a UBC alumna, summarizes xeriscape landscaping as "gardening with the climate." She champions long-term planning and a wealth of native and water-wise plants that thrive with minimal irrigation, maintenance, and pest control.

As a former xeriscape nursery owner on nearby Curtis Road, Steele took note of the wild vegetation on the campus periphery: Douglas maple and Columbian hawthorn trees, brown-eyed susans, shrubs such as sumac, ocean spray, wild rose—the list goes on.

This spring, the green space outside the gym's new annex was xeriscaped with drought-tolerant Eco Smart Blend sod, water-wise plants, and two sand volleyball courts. A ginkgo tree—a deciduous living fossil native only to China and Japan—was planted in the east alcove outside the gym.

"On the whole," Steele says, "the landscaping materials chosen for the site were appropriate for the light and low-water conditions. It's a positive example of Living Lab success as there was some consultation, interaction, and collaboration."

She commends the use of Eco Smart turf, engineered for the Okanagan climate; native yarrow; and an 'Autumn Brilliance' Saskatoon tree planted in the west alcove.

Along with the xeriscaping, a new volleyball space was built adjacent to The Hangar. Steele lauds the new sand courts as a welcome and essentially xeric substitute for turf. Partly influenced by the VOICE study, a healthy campus development project led by the School of Nursing's Assoc. Prof. Emerita Claire Budgen, the new sand courts actualize students' desire for more recreation amenities on campus.

Culver's ad-hoc committee—which includes Roger Bizzotto (director, Facilities Management) and Leanne Bilodeau

(director, Sustainability Operations)—also collaborated with anthropology professor John Wagner.

Wagner's interest as an educator in campus xeriscaping focuses on teaching tools inherent in such natural UBC spaces as the pond behind the Engineering, Management and Education Building, the ponderosa pine forest, and Robert Lake in the Endowment Lands.



Campus as a Living Lab committee members are Director of Sustainability Operations Leanne Bilodeau, Okanagan Sustainability Institute Director Keith Culver, and Facilities Management Director Roger Bizzotto.

He takes his Anthropology 245: Culture and the Environment class on field trips there, immersing students in the cultural history of each landscape. Students tour the glacial remnants of hills and ravines beside the pond, an area full of native species such as the bunchgrasses that were a dominant feature of the Okanagan landscape before settlement.

The Hangar project is "a step in the right direction," Wagner says, "but I think more real language around ecological values is needed in future plans."

"Either way," he says, "I'm enthusiastic about the committee, what we're trying to do, and that Keith invited me to be a part of it."

Steele adds: "This is a really positive new direction. I've always felt that UBC's Okanagan campus could be a perfect example of appropriate native plant and water-wise landscaping—trying to create a sense of place, so that when you arrive at UBC, you don't feel like you're at just Anywhere Campus. You know you're at a distinctly Okanagan campus." ●



Okanagan Xeriscape Association Executive Director Gwen Steele and Anthropology Associate Professor John Wagner