...p plans for Natural Heritage Garden



Marian St. Clair
Gardening

By now, everyone who follows the news has read or heard about last weekend's devastation at the South Carolina Botanical Garden, when a flash flood tore through the Natural Heritage Garden, ripping away rare plants, dumping tons of sediment and debris, and destroying paths, bridges and irrigation systems.

But do you know what the Natural Heritage Garden is? Or why it's important?

The Natural Heritage Garden, still under development when disaster struck, is to be the largest and most comprehensive collection of native plants in a public garden in South Carolina and across the Southeast. That collection is not just exhibited for its own sake, however. It's an integral part of a living and growing diorama of native habitats, from those found in the Jocassee Gorges of the Upstate to those of the Carolina Bays of the Lowcountry.

Stretching along Stevens Creek from the Hunt Cabin to the Fran Hanson Discovery Center, the garden is designed to showcase Rich Cove Forest, Piedmont Oak/Hickory Forest, Carolina Prairie, Carolina Bay (the only geographically out-of-place exhibit), Longleaf Pine Forest, and finally, Maritime Forest. A few of the more unusual habitats include a granite outcrop, a pocosin (swamp on a hill), and a Native American Shell Ring.

The purpose and value of the Natural Heritage Garden is manifold. It proves habitat for rare, threatened and endangered plant species indigenous to our region; it fosters

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Staff and volunteers work at the South Carolina Botanical Garden following recent flooding. MARIAN ST. CLAIR

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an understanding of our natural resources and our connection to them; it aids our knowledge of and appreciation for our heritage; it serves as a research station for Clemson University and SCBG faculty, staff and students, as well as the larger academic and horticultural community; and it is an authentic outdoor classroom for schoolchildren.

One small part of the garden — the Acidic Cove Forest — includes plants such as rhododendrons and mountain laurels that thrive in the Upstate. Oconee Bells (Shortia galacifolia), the rare and unique herbaceous evergreen groundcover native to the Jocassee Gorges area, has been transplanted into this area.

The surviving native range of Oconee Bells (with its earliest collection site now under Lake Jocassee) is limited to a narrow zone around Lakes Jocassee and Keowee in Oconee and Pickens counties, and a small area in North Carolina. Though the plant is not difficult to grow in the right conditions, and is now cultivated in many gardens along the Eastern Seaboard, maintaining genetic diversity in the plant population is of great concern, as these plants are typically propagated by vegetative methods.

Unfortunately, the Acidic Cove Forest was among areas hardest hit by floodwaters, and a number of newly planted, seed-grown Oconee Bells were destroyed or washed away.

It's going to take more than a bit of bad weather, however, to swamp plans for the Natural Heritage Garden. When I surveyed the area a few days after the flood, garden staff and volunteers were already at work and fundraising efforts were well underway.

It isn't going to be easy, though, and rebuilding and replanting aren't going to happen overnight. Preliminary cost estimates measure the damage to infrastructure at more than $200,000, and the area making up the Natural Heritage Garden may be closed for many months. But the remaining portions of the South Carolina Botanical Garden, from the renowned Cruickshank Hosta Garden to the popular Children's Garden, are and will remain free attractions for the roughly 400,000 annual visitors who relish their charms.

If you want to follow the day-to-day news and restoration efforts at the South Carolina Botanical Garden, go to its Facebook page.

To volunteer your time or donate money, visit the website at www.clemson.edu/public/scbg.

As director Patrick McMillan said, "If we all share and if everyone helps, even a small amount, we will emerge greener and better than ever."