



WASHINGTON COUNTY
WATER CONSERVANCY DISTRICT

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Contact: Karry Rathje
Public Information Manager
435.668.5622
krathje@wcwcd.utah.gov

Red Hills Desert Garden scheduled to open in spring 2015

St. George will soon be home to Utah's first interactive desert garden showcasing water-efficient landscapes, endangered species and prehistoric tracks in one central location – Red Hills Desert Garden. The nearly 5-acre garden, located at 375 E. Red Hills Parkway, promotes the education and research of conservation as well as serving as an outdoor social and recreational amenity for public enjoyment. Thousands are expected to visit the garden annually.

“Red Hills Desert Garden encourages water and endangered species conservation in a picturesque environment,” said Ron Thompson, general manager of Washington County Water Conservancy District. “Visitors of all ages can come to the garden and experience firsthand the beauty of a water-efficient landscape while learning about plants and irrigation. In addition, visitors may see some of the rarest fish species on earth; learn about the endangered Mojave Desert Tortoise; and see dinosaur tracks found onsite dating back 200 million years. We're confident the garden will be a popular community amenity visitors will enjoy for years to come.”

The garden will feature more than 170 water-efficient plant varieties that thrive in our local climate. In addition, the garden will provide information on landscape design, installation and maintenance. A section of the garden will also highlight different irrigation options and best installation practices to assist home and business owners considering a desert landscape.

“Approximately 61 percent of Washington County's residential water is currently used for outdoor irrigation,” said Julie Gillins, water conservation manager, Washington County Water Conservancy District. “Converting turf to a desert landscape is one of the biggest steps a home or business owner can take to reduce water use and save money on monthly water costs.”

Desert landscapes use an average of 55 gallons of water less than turf per square foot annually. The garden will use five million gallons of water less per year than a similar-sized turf landscape – that's enough water to support 50 average American homes for a year. And it results in an annual savings of \$8,000 in water rates.

And it's not just about saving water and money, according to Mark Goble, landscape architect for the City of St. George. “Desert landscapes require significantly less maintenance and boast more color, texture and dimension compared to turf,” he said. “We're confident as more home and business owners experience the natural beauty and other benefits of water-efficient landscapes, it will become the look of choice here in Southern Utah.”

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Central to the garden's design is a 1,150-foot meandering stream stocked with native and endangered fish, including one of the nation's most rare species – the woundfin. The stream was designed to model the natural watershed of the Virgin River. Water from the Virgin River will be cycled through the stream before being used to water St. George's public facilities, including parks, schools and cemeteries. "This lets visitors see the fish in a more natural habitat and uses little to no water – it's the best case scenario," said Henry Maddux, program director for the Virgin River Program. To assist with viewing the fish, project developers created a replica slot canyon that leads to a fish viewing area. Virgin River Program will stock and care for the aquatic habitat in the stream.

"Partnering with the Virgin River Program allows us to highlight another essential element of conservation – conserving our native and endangered fish," said Thompson. "We manage water for fish habitat in addition to all of our other water users. Many who have never seen these rare species will now have the opportunity to do so at the garden, thanks to the program."

The garden will also feature a variety of unique fossil tracks made by dinosaurs of all sizes as they walked in the mud or swam in shallow streams that existed here approximately 200 million years ago. Tracks for the megapnasaurous, scutellosaurus and dilophosaurs are found throughout the site.

Immediately adjacent to the garden is the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve, which was established in 1996 for the protection of the Mojave Desert Tortoise and other rare plants and animals. The reserve offers hikers, cyclists and outdoor enthusiasts' dozens of trails options, which connect to Red Hills Desert Garden allowing for an even greater outdoor experience.

The garden will be programmed with a variety of educational workshops and special events to highlight the many social, recreational and educational amenities of the garden. Information on special events will be announced in 2015.

Red Hills Desert Garden is a collaborative project of Washington County Water Conservancy District, City of St. George and Virgin River Program. Visit wcwcd.org for more details.