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Seeds: Volunteer gardeners plan to help Sacramento-area parks

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Don't get mad, start weeding.

Amid big cuts in public funding, volunteers are coming to the rescue of local city parks.

At William Land Park, a new corps is mobilizing to take care of the basic maintenance duties that city crews once performed.

At McKinley Park, the rose garden's "Friends" group will be out pulling weeds while recruiting more garden helpers.

And more city park space may soon be used for community vegetable gardens, answering a demand to grow food instead of lawn.

It's all part of a grass-roots movement to keep Sacramento beautiful and maybe a little greener.

The Land Park effort could become a model. Organized by the Land Park Community Association, the new Land Park Volunteer Corps will kick off next Saturday, starting at 9 a.m. in the picnic area behind Fairytale Town and ending at noon with a barbecue.

According to coordinator Craig Powell, volunteers will handle "new plantings, planter maintenance, pond cleanup, weeding and the like."

With advice from UC master gardeners, the Land Park volunteers will help out on the first Saturday of each non-winter month, Powell said. Learn more at the Land Park Community Association website, www.landpark.org.

The benefits of volunteer involvement are already in bloom at McKinley Park's historic rose garden. In February, the new Friends of the McKinley Park Rose Garden, along with AmeriCorps workers and park staff, planted about 300 rosebushes donated by Star Roses and Weeks Roses.

But it's spring, so the weeds are out in force, too. Led by volunteers Ellie Longanecker and Jason Davis, the Friends plan to start regular work sessions beginning at 9 a.m. next Saturday. Link up with them via Facebook or call Davis at (916) 721-0377.

Lawns require a lot of water, a major expense. So some public parks have begun converting green-space expanses to more productive, water-efficient uses. Vegetables may not be drought-tolerant, but beans demand less water than bluegrass. And people can eat beans.

Community gardens have sprouted in former park space at several locations around Sacramento, including Southside Park on Fifth Street, Danny Nunn Park on Power Inn Road and Strauch Park in Natomas. More are in the works, according to coordinator Bill Maynard, with about 40 sites under consideration.

"The city wants to conserve water," Maynard said, "and gardens use less water than lawn."

To learn more, go to www.cityofsacramento.org and follow the links to "Parks and Recreation" and "Community Gardens." Or contact Maynard at (916) 808-4943 or wmaynard@cityofsacramento.org.

Fight weeds with compass

A study in the current issue of *Weed Science* found that the orientation of crop rows can cut down on weeds while boosting yields. How? The vegetables and grains shade the weed seedlings, denying them the sunlight to grow.

"Crops can create a canopy over weed plants, giving the weeds more shade than sun, suppressing weed growth and maximizing crop yield," said the researchers, who planted test crops in western Australia.

Wheat and barley benefited most when placed in rows running east to west rather than north to south, with yields up 24 percent or more. Meanwhile, weed biomass was reduced by 51 percent for wheat and 37 percent for barley.

The trick in the home garden or on the commercial farm is to situate rows at a near right angle to incoming sunlight, said the report. The angle changes with latitude.

For Sacramento (at 38.7 degrees latitude), the report suggests rows running north-south in summer and east-west the rest of the year for maximum sunlight absorption.

Free garden guide

Speaking of garden layouts, Burpee has debuted a guide for newbie vegetable gardeners. Released on Thursday, the 40th anniversary of Earth Day, the 32-page "Garden Fresh" booklet offers advice on planning your garden, which vegetables to grow, water and fertilizer needs, stakes vs. cages, plus tips to maximize success. You can get one free at www.burpeehomegardens.com.

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