



(LEFT) Bing and Betty Jackson meticulously cared for their flower and vegetable garden on Mill Creek. Bing donated the garden property to a group of friends who formed a non-profit to care for the property for the benefit of the community. (Photo courtesy Jackson's Garden)

(BELOW) Perhaps the happiest times of Bing and Betty Jackson's lives were spent in their splendid Shangri-La on Mill Creek. The restored garden is now open to the public to enjoy as a park. (Photo courtesy Jackson's Garden)



JACKSON'S GARDEN



A gift that keeps on giving

The half-mile public nature trail at Jackson's Garden winds through the garden and along Mill Creek. The Montana Conservation Corps assisted with construction of the trail. (Photo by Sara Gilman)

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Betty and Leslie “Bing” Jackson were the kind of neighbors everybody wants. The schoolteachers were friendly, considerate and gave their time generously to a multitude of civic activities.

Bing grew up in Sheridan and graduated from Sheridan High in 1945. He joined the Army in December the same year and was honorably discharged as a corporal in 1947. Bing returned to Sheridan and worked as a clerk in Madison’s Store and later as an assistant in his father’s bakery.

Betty came to town to teach home economics and Bing was smitten with the pretty, young teacher from Great Falls. The two started a relationship, but the romance was interrupted when Betty moved back to Great Falls to be near her home.

Bing went off to college and returned to Sheridan to start a career as a schoolteacher. In the late 1960s, Bing and Betty renewed their romance and the couple were married in 1968. Betty resumed teaching at Sheridan School and the pair began a life together, devoted to each other, their students and their community.

In 1972, the Jacksons purchased a nine-acre plot along babbling Mill Creek with plans to build a house. Ultimately, the couple decided not to build the house and planted a garden instead. But the planting didn’t start right away. The Jacksons worked for months clearing rocks, sagebrush and weeds from their stream-side parcel and hauled truckload after truckload of topsoil to replace the stones and weeds. They drilled a well to sustain their garden and built a garage to store their implements. With Bing and Betty’s tender, loving care, the streamside plot became a beautiful, sprawling garden, with rainbow-colored flower beds and enough vegetables to feed a platoon.

The Jacksons were well-known for their generosity and loved sharing the bounty of their garden. Everyone in Sheridan had a standing invitation to pick flowers and harvest vegetables. But as the couple grew older, it became more difficult for them to maintain the lush garden.

Following Betty’s death in 2002, Bing did what he could, but the garden became overgrown and soon resembled the jungle of weeds the pair had purchased decades earlier.

Bing’s friends, Chris and Frank McKeever, began a community effort to restore the garden. Other friends and neighbors, anxious to pay back the Jacksons for their years of generosity, joined in the effort. Within three years, the garden was returned to its previous splendor.

The volunteers, who toiled to restore the garden developed a plan to maintain it. The group organized, elected a board of directors, and established rules for how the community garden would be managed. Volunteers who helped in the garden would receive a share of the vegetables. Otherwise, the garden remained open for the entire community to enjoy as a park.

In 2010, the group organized as a non-profit called Jackson’s Garden, and diligently pursued assistance to improve the garden. Bing and Betty had always contemplated donating the garden to the town for use as a park but, with a group formed specifically to care for the garden, Bing donated the property to the newly founded non-profit.

The following year, with assistance from the Montana Conservation Corps, Jackson’s Garden built a nature trail, winding for a half-mile through the woods along Mill Creek. Markers along the trail teach visitors about the wide variety of flora. That same summer, with help from the USDA Natural Resource Conservation District, the group built a 48-foot long high tunnel greenhouse. In 2012, Jackson’s Garden installed an underground irrigation system for the lawn and a drip irrigation system for the vegetable garden.

Having witnessed his and his wife’s glorious garden returned to its former beauty, and heartened to know it would be cared for, Bing passed away in September 2012. Gone but not forgotten, the Jacksons continue to give with their gift of a garden, which remains open to anyone who wishes to visit.

JACKSON'S GARDEN TODAY

Since Bing's passing in 2012, Jackson's Garden has completed many more improvement projects, including a new fence and gate, handicapped access, solar panels on the garage, a new equipment building, a playground for kids, remodeling of the garage and, just this spring, the removal of 12 hazardous cottonwood trees.

The current Jackson's Garden board of directors consists of president Linda Day, vice-president Gail Leary, treasurer Carla Marsh, secretary Sandy Baril and members Kathy Shepherd, Claire Leonard and Tara Bowery. The group has continued the shared garden concept and implemented educational programs and community events at the garden.

"Bing and Betty always wanted that this place would always be a garden, never developed, just open space for people to come and enjoy," said Marsh.

"They were both schoolteachers here in Sheridan, and I think that's a bond we had," said Shepherd. "A lot of the people who started this had Mr. Jackson as a teacher. He was Carla's husband's Little League coach."

"The Jacksons were just the kind of people who gave and gave and gave," said Baril. "They were volunteers in the community; they were just great people. One of the things that got people started here, before there was any thought of a community garden, was to come up and help them. They came up to help Bing, because he's a guy they really loved."

The garden is open at all times for anyone to visit, sit in the garden or stroll along the nature trail. A gardening membership is also available for people who want to harvest vegetables.

"The deed stipulated it would always have to be for the community as a whole, meaning the Ruby Valley or anybody who comes to visit," said Shepherd. "Once the 501c3 was organized, a membership structure was developed, where you pay a membership fee and then volunteer so many hours if you want to take a vegetable yield. Anybody in the community can join."

Members who pay a \$50 fee and help out in the garden are allotted a generous amount of vegetables. Rather than individual plots, the vegetable garden is a communal effort, tended to by several gardening members. Members are expected to contribute 12-20 hours per month when the garden is in season, either working in the garden or performing administrative tasks, such as grant writing, volunteer management, fundraising and event planning.

"Those who wish to have vegetables work together in the garden," said Baril. "Sometimes we have organized work days, but it's always open for anybody to come up anytime and do what needs to be done. It's pretty casual and open-ended."

"We start off with the cold weather crops, lettuce, spinach, kale, radishes, Swiss chard, broccoli and cauliflower," said Baril. "By the end of May, when you can be kind of sure you're not going to get a hard freeze, we'll start planting everything else - peas, beans and



A nature trail at Jackson's Garden winds along Mill Creek. The garden is open year-round at no cost for everyone to visit and enjoy the gorgeous surroundings. (G. Hamill photo)

tomatoes. We have tried corn but it was not too successful because the raccoons got into it. All kinds of summer and winter squash, pumpkins, onions, potatoes, garlic, beets, carrots."

Members can expect to take home plenty of vegetables and save money on grocery expenses. Excess vegetables are routinely donated to the town's senior center. "For most of the vegetables, I'd say a family of four would get at least all the vegetables they need fresh for the season," said Baril.

"Our problem is getting someone to harvest it and take it when it's ready," said Day. "Summer comes and people get crammed with company and they've got baseball games and vacations."

"We send out emails and tell people there's a bumper crop - come out and pick it and if you know anybody who can use it, do it," said Baril.

Jackson's Garden holds a variety of events to have fun and raise funds. "In the past, we've held free concerts and sold food, but we can't do that anymore because of the new sanitarian laws," said Shepherd. "We've got to have food prepared, if we're going to sell it, in a certified kitchen. We have a yearly brunch that brings in up to 225 people on the first Sunday in August. It coincides with the Sheridan Summer Festival that weekend. We cook all of the food at the Shovel and Spoon restaurant, bring it all up here and set up a beautiful buffet. We have a church service with a number of local churches joined together. We also have a silent auction. That's our major fundraiser of the year."

The group also holds an annual dinner on the Sunday closest to Valentine's Day. "We do a beautiful four-course Italian dinner in the upstairs of the Ruby Hotel," said Shepherd.

THE FUTURE OF JACKSON'S GARDEN

Incredibly, considering the incentive of abundant fresh vegetables at a minimal cost of money and labor, just 12 gardening members participated at Jackson's Garden last summer. The group plans a major publicity campaign and membership drive this summer. "Even though this has been going on for 10 years, there are people in

Sheridan and Twin Bridges who don't know we're here," said Day.

"They've driven by and they think it's private," said Baril. "They don't know who we are and what we are. We want it out there that we are open to the public. Come have a picnic. Bring your kids; let them play on the playground. Walk the nature trail; enjoy our flowers. But if you want to pick flowers, talk to Carla and make a donation. They are there for everyone to enjoy, rather than take home."

"It open to the public 24/7," said Baril. "You are welcome here."

"The only thing you have to do is close the gate," said Day. "We have deer and one year, they ate all the flowers."

The group also has plans to host weddings at Jackson's Garden in the future. For more information, see www.jacksonsgarden.org.



The non-profit organization Jackson's Garden obtained help from the USDA Natural Resource Conservation District to build a high-tunnel greenhouse to extend the limited Montana growing season. (Photo by Sara Gilman)



Jackson's Garden is open 365 days a year for the public to enjoy and includes a play area for kids. (G. Hamill photo)

Summer/fall events at Jackson's Garden

JACKSON'S GARDEN COMMUNITY POTLUCK

JUNE 24, 2018, 5:30 p.m.

Everyone is invited to a community potluck at Jackson's Garden. Bring a dish to share and see what's growing in the gardens this year!

AUG. 05, 2018

ANNUAL FUNDRAISER BRUNCH & COMMUNITY CHURCH SERVICE

9 a.m. CHURCH SERVICE; 10-12 p.m.
BRUNCH

9 a.m. Ecumenical worship service at the garden followed by a brunch fundraiser from 10-12 p.m. This brunch is a perfect opportunity for everyone to enjoy good food, conversation and see what's growing in the gardens. A silent auction and drawing for the raffle will be held during brunch.

The raffle is for a queen size quilt made and donated by Linda Day, a cedar fence post floor coat rack made and donated by Paul Marsh of Wisconsin Creek Cabin Creations, and a Mexican dinner for 8 with margaritas catered by Kathy Shepherd. Brunch is by donation. All proceeds go toward operating expenses of Jackson's Garden.

OCT. 06, 2018

ANNUAL CIDER PRESSING

10 a.m. - 2 p.m.

Gather with us to celebrate the fall and press cider at the Garden. Everyone is invited to bring their apples and clean containers and take home the cider they press. Not pressing apples? You're welcome to come watch!