

## GARDEN SPOTLIGHT: Herald-Times, July 12, 2008

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### Traffic island garden creates smiles

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What makes a group of Spencer residents drag themselves from bed in the wee hours of the weekend to congregate at the traffic island at the intersection of highways 46 and 231 while early-morning traffic rumbles past them?

The answer is simple: civic pride combined with the love of gardening. Under their care, a desolate traffic island has literally blossomed into an oasis on the edge of town.

“It was unmown high grass before we took over,” said Julie Coffin of the Owen County Garden Club. “The highway department mowed it a couple of times a year. It looked weedy and trashy.”

Sponsored by the Purdue Extension Office, the Owen County Garden Club has 30 to 40 active members, including a handful of Master Gardeners. Their enthusiasm runs high and their spouses often involve themselves with club projects. Dues are a modest \$5.00 per year and there are absolutely no qualifications to get into the club.

“People always say, ‘Oh, I don’t know enough about gardening,’” Julie laughed. “But we tell them ‘That’s all right, the only thing you need is enthusiasm.’”

The group already maintains decorative plantings in 17 concrete urn planters

along Morgan Street and the corners around the Owen County courthouse and Cooper Park. They turned to the idea of brightening the dismal intersection of highways 46 and 231 by planting the traffic island with attractive perennial shrubs and flowers. But getting permission to do this was not easy.

“This is Indiana Highway Department land, and they have to nod before you can do anything to their land,” explained Julie. “You can’t plant anything that would impede drivers’ views. I started making calls in 2004, and we had the paperwork done by May 2005.”

The group has a modified Adopt-A-Highway agreement with the state.

“We don’t block traffic, and we don’t work on holiday weekends because there’s more traffic,” she continued. “They gave us a bagful of orange and yellow highway worker safety vests. There are common-sense things involved in a project like this.”

On the day that this reporter visited, the volunteers were garbed in their official state highway safety vests and were in high spirits. Their goal that day was to transport mulch from a nearby parking lot over to the traffic island using wheelbarrows whenever a break in the traffic allowed, and after that to plant flats of petunias. Even at 8 in the morning, a surprising number of vehicles roar through that intersection.

“You should see it later in the day,” Julie noted ruefully. “That’s why we work mornings.”

Because the island is surrounded by pavement that's subject to salting in the winter, the soil needed a lot of help. A truckload of topsoil was added in 2005; it was spread over the island and then tilled in. Stone was added in a line around the outer edge, and decorative rocks were installed in the center of the bed.

The first plantings were salt-tolerant sedum, low spreading juniper bushes and 'Stella D'Oro' daylilies. The 'Knock - Out' roses went in a season later, and last fall the group planted spring-blooming bulbs including large purple-flowered alliums.

The group employs techniques that ease the effort of maintaining the island. For example, spring-blooming bulbs are planted in pots that are sunk into the ground. When the blooms are done and the foliage starts to wither, the pots can be lifted and taken away to be stored at the back of someone's garage. In the fall it's no problem to replant them the same way.

The Owen County Garden Club underwrites the cost of the project through fundraising.

"It cost several hundred dollars just for the petunias," Julie noted. "The 'Knock - Out' roses are probably \$30 apiece."

The group's efforts have won wide public support, including several highly complimentary letters to the editor of the Spencer Evening World. The soil and rocks needed to launch the project were gladly donated.

"We get people all the time who tell us the triangle looks wonderful," said fellow garden club member Ann Henk. "People drive by and give us thumbs-up. We get so many compliments that it must be boosting community pride."

"I just enjoy doing it, and this area needs the help," said volunteer John Fuhs. "We get Indy traffic, and Bloomington and Terre Haute traffic. This is one of the first spots you see when you come into Spencer."

"People stop us on the street while we're working and say 'Oh, it looks so pretty,'" said Julie Coffin. "We say 'That's the only payment we want!'"

"This is great!" said volunteer Tony Neff. "I really enjoy it. Last time I worked, four cars went by and rolled down their windows and said 'Great job!' That just made my whole day."

The island before its transformation by the group was generic and invisible. Today, with petunias, ageratum, and roses all abloom, it's a handsome addition to the Spencer landscape. Owen County's hard-working volunteers have already invested more than 50 hours of labor on the project this year.

The flooding that damaged many areas of Spencer did not spare the traffic island, which was completely submerged by water, requiring more labor to repair the damage.

"The perennials are bearing up; the petunias could be doing better," sighed Julie. "We lost less mulch than I would have thought."

The garden club's agreement with the highway department runs until the year 2012.

"But there's a typo on the form that says 2112, so we'll definitely be at it for a while to come," smiled Julie.

*The Owen County Garden Club can be contacted via current president Nancy Sparks, 812-829-1549.*



Julia Coffin and Tony Neff work early in the morning on the traffic island project. Photo by Carrol Krause

work of the Owen County Garden Club. Photo by Carrol Krause



The island was submerged by flooding after this photo was taken, but fortunately it did not wash away all the mulch spread by John Fuhs and Ann Henk. Photo by Carrol Krause



Hard work and dedication inspire these volunteers to turn out at 7 a.m. on Saturday mornings in Spencer. Here, Ann Henk spreads mulch. Photo by Carrol Krause



Julie Coffin replaces spring bloomers with summer performers. Photo by Carrol Krause



Flowers bloom in the traffic island where state highways meet in Spencer, thanks to the hard