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First Phase of Four-Phase Botanical Garden Expected To Begin Construction In August

By Phil Parker

Journal Staff Writer

Plant life from South Africa, New Zealand and the Middle East will find its way into Santa Fe's first botanical garden. It'll be home to fruit trees, cactuses, flowers, a xeric lawn, an outdoor classroom, an ethnobotanical walk and a courtyard for parties called "The Jewel Box."

Ground breaks on the planned Santa Fe Botanical Garden in late August. The garden will cover 13 acres just across Camino Lejo from the Museum of International Folk Art on Museum Hill, much of it along Arroyo de los Pinos. The project's designer, W. Gary Smith, toured the dry, beat-up land Tuesday where the first phase, the Orchard Garden, will be planted.

Smith, who's based in Austin, Texas, and has been designing segments of botanical gardens for 25 years, has spent days on the site, he said, "sketching and contemplating." He also employed aerial photographs and topographical surveys.

"My first visit to this site, I said, 'This is not possible. This is never going to be a garden,' " he said.

He came around after studying the environment and learning which plants can thrive in water-starved New Mexico. Finding flora that can withstand drought doesn't limit the vision, he said. It actually helps.

"Limiting the palette is good; it keeps us from getting carried away," Smith said. "We don't want it to look like a giant bowl of M&Ms."

The Orchard Gardens features the main entrance to the area. It'll have a meadow of flowers; 12 fruit trees, including apples, peaches and pears; a dry garden for plants that require zero irrigation; and a section for only "heirloom" plants, native to northern New Mexico.

The entire Orchard Gardens slopes toward its center, forming a "natural dish," Smith said, to collect rainwater. The more water a plant needs, the more centralized it will be. With that consideration in mind, Smith said he tried to utilize "color choreography."

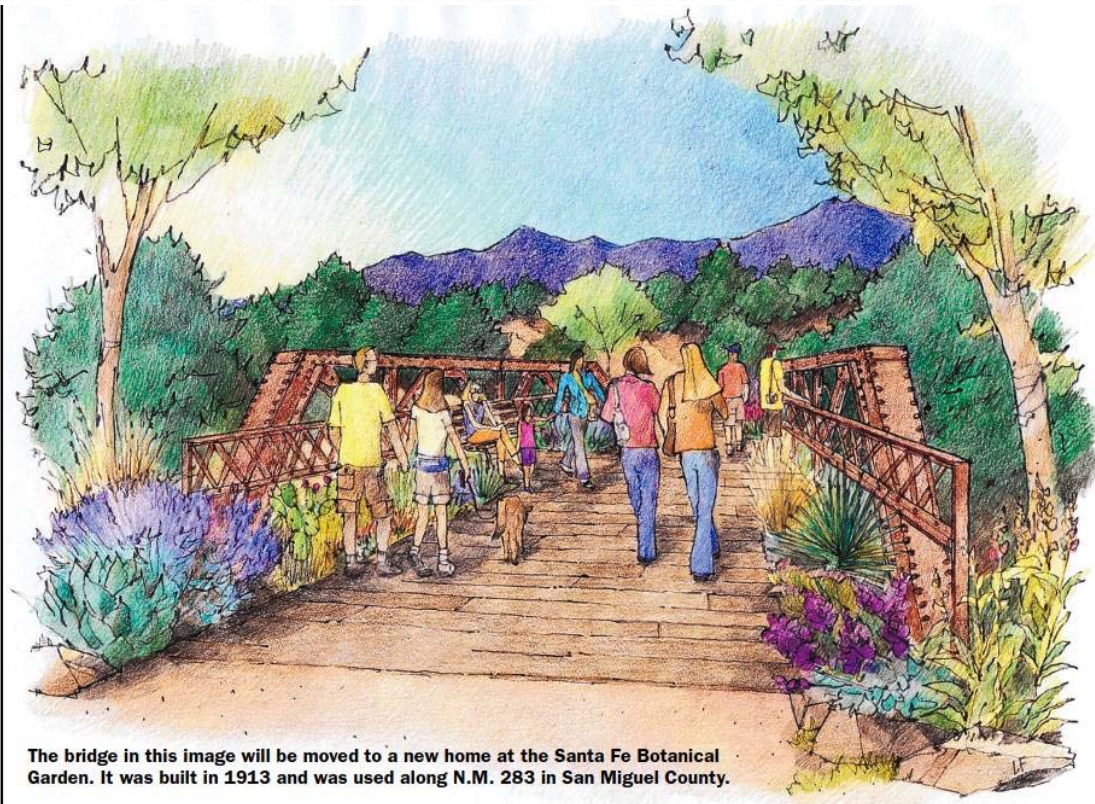
"I'm really using plants as a painter uses color on a canvas," he said. "In certain seasons there will be an almost weekly change."

Joining the gardens will be the Kearny's Gap Bridge, transplanted from San Miguel County southwest of Las Vegas. The bridge was built in 1913 along N.M. 283, which follows the path of the Old Santa Fe Trail. It is expected to be the centerpiece for the garden's groundbreaking this summer.

This is Phase 1 of a four phase project, expected to take five years and cost \$7.5 million. After the Orchard Gardens, contracted teams will install the Courtyard Gardens, which feature gathering places, including the Jewel Box, and the Naturalistic Gardens, with the xeric (dry) lawn and spaces for classes of children to get some experiential education.

The final phase will update the Arroyo Trails system, with paths for walking or biking.

The nonprofit Santa Fe Botanical Garden group — which first started hunting a spot for the garden in 1987 — has so far raised \$1.6 million, according to executive director Linda Milbourn. The city of Santa Fe has put about \$250,000 into the project, Milbourn said, to develop the biking trail along the arroyo. Milbourn said "we're very confident" fundraising efforts will bring in what's need to finish the \$7.5 million project.



The bridge in this image will be moved to a new home at the Santa Fe Botanical Garden. It was built in 1913 and was used along N.M. 283 in San Miguel County.