Power lines and trees can be friends
Pacific Power grant sparks Seaside to plant ‘utility friendly’ trees at arboretum

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The Daily Astorian

SEASIDE - If there's one thing that the new Clatsop County Arboretum is trying to prove, it's this: Trees and overhead power lines can be compatible.

Many North Coast residents who experience power outages with every storm that blows in may find that difficult to believe. But, say those who are planning the arboretum's dedication at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, the proof is in the planting.

"That was one of the things we wanted to show people: what it would look like to have a 'utility friendly' tree that is planted underneath utility lines. So some of them are planted directly under intentionally," said Sheila Holden, regional community manager for Pacific Power.

Besides providing a quiet space to relax or to take a picnic lunch, the arboretum adjacent to the Seaside Historical Museum, 570 Necanicum Drive, will also become a demonstration project.

All of the trees planted there are recommended by Pacific Power for planting in yards where power lines are nearby. While no one suggests that any tree be planted under a power line, the arboretum is trying to show that, because the trees probably won't grow as tall as the lines, they aren't likely to knock the lines down in a windstorm.

The trees also were chosen for their ability to withstand salt spray and wind, said Kristin Ramstad, community assistance forester in the Oregon Department of Forestry's Urban and Community Forestry Program. The program works with cities to determine what trees work best in each location.

"Our program has had a long familiarity with power line issues inside of cities, and we've worked with PGE, Pacific Power and some of the smaller power companies throughout Oregon about issues with trees near power lines," Ramstad said.

The forestry program and Pacific Power have established other arboretums in Corvallis and Albany. The Clatsop County arboretum in Seaside came about after the power company issued a request for proposals from cities in the county that might want to host an arboretum, Holden said. The city of Seaside, Seaside Chamber of Commerce, the city's tree committee and the history museum joined together to apply for Pacific Power's $5,000 grant.

"After the great storm of 2007, everyone in the Clatsop community and around the North Coast experienced such an extreme loss of trees, and we experienced such an extreme loss of power because of the trees," Holden recalled. "We thought, as people were getting ready to replace their trees, it would be good to promote the idea of finding native trees or trees that were utility friendly. They would be less likely to create a problem after the next storm."
The arboretum also will show what the trees look like and demonstrate that "people can find the beauty that they're looking for and the diversity of foliage that they want," Holden added.

There were other considerations, too, when selecting the trees, Ramstad noted.

"The challenge with this project was to figure out what trees could possibly survive coastal conditions - the wind and the salt - as well as to be short in stature enough to not blow into power lines," she said.

She consulted local arborists and landscapers to figure out what trees to plant from the list supplied by Pacific Power. Among those landscapers was Pam Fleming, Seaside's city gardener and owner of Nature's Helper Inc. Fleming already had experience working with the forestry department and Pacific Power in selecting trees for Seaside, and she had done some projects with Nehalem arborist Joe Balden, who also helped with the arboretum.

Besides the size of the trees, Fleming had additional criteria for the trees being selected.

"Because it's an arboretum, I wanted the trees to have interest constantly, either the form of the tree, or the leaf color or leaf texture or the bloom. Not all of them bloom - some of them are weeping types. That was what I was looking for, just something constantly happening," Fleming said.

The field adjacent to the museum was selected because power lines run across the north edge of it and because there's enough room for 11 trees along the periphery. The center of the space is used for outdoor events, including the museum's ice cream social, so no trees will be planted there.

Museum board member Ken Ward said the board was "absolutely ecstatic" about the arboretum.

"We've been trying to do something like that in our own way with no money and a lot of help from people. We have a new parking lot, and the trees will be a great addition," Ward said.

Once the 11 trees were selected, landscape students from the Tongue Point Job Corps spent a day planting them, with volunteer help from Ben Olson, of Clean Sweep, who dug the holes.

The trees included in the arboretum are a Japanese Hornbeam, three Dwarf Hinoki cypresses, 'Jack' pear, Adirondack crabapple, Golden Desert ash, 'Pink Chimes' Japanese Snowbell, Weeping Katsura, 'Snow Goose' Japanese cherry and Tall Stewarta.

The effort is a community project, said Jeanne Clark, events coordinator at the Seaside Chamber of Commerce, and so will be the dedication, which, appropriately, is planned during Arbor Week. Activities include the reading of a poem about trees, a performance by the Seaside High School jazz choir, comments by Pacific Power President Pat Reiten and the unveiling of the trees by students from Suzanna Kruger's seventh-grade science class from Broadway Middle School.

Although the newly planted arboretum looks somewhat sparse, Clark already envisions what it will be in the future.

"It's going to be just lovely," she said. "There will be a path created around the plants, and there will be benches. It will be a lovely place to sit. I'll probably come to feed the birds."

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