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Mesa's best-kept secret is right at a busy intersection. Here's how to visit this hidden gem

Weldon B. Johnson, Arizona Republic Published 6:10 a.m. MT Dec. 11, 2019 | Updated 7:53 p.m. MT Dec. 11, 2019

Thousands of motorists drive by every day, but few stop to enjoy the beauty of the Rose Garden at Mesa Community College.

The college has partnered with the Mesa-East Valley Rose Society to cultivate flowers at the busy intersection of Dobson Road and Southern Avenue in Mesa since 1997. The seeds for this hidden gem were planted by the president of the college at that time, Larry Christiansen, who wanted to spruce up the campus common area.

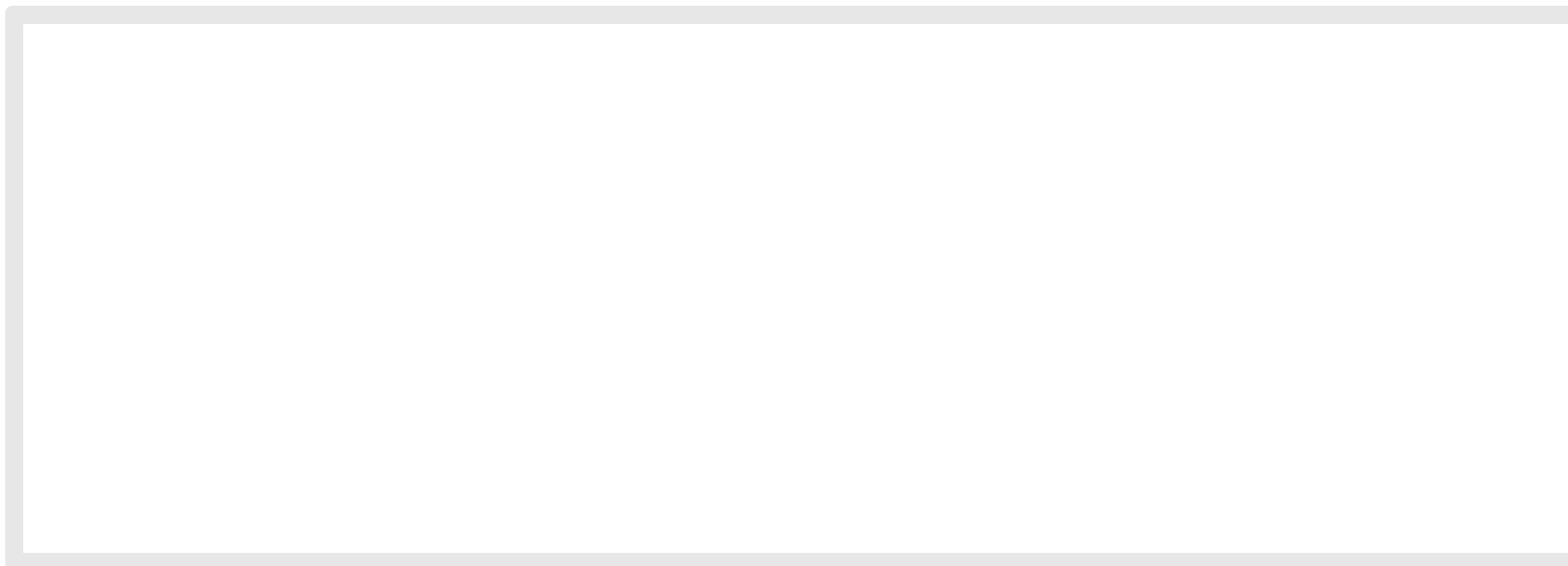
Marylou Coffman, curator of the garden, said the garden has a peaceful feel even though visitors are just yards away from a thoroughfare.

"Sometimes it does get a little noisy," Coffman said. "But this garden is beautiful. It's one of the most relaxing places I know."

How the garden grew

Coffman was part of the project from the start. She said it came together more quickly than expected as contributions of money (no school funds were to be used) and flowers flowed in.

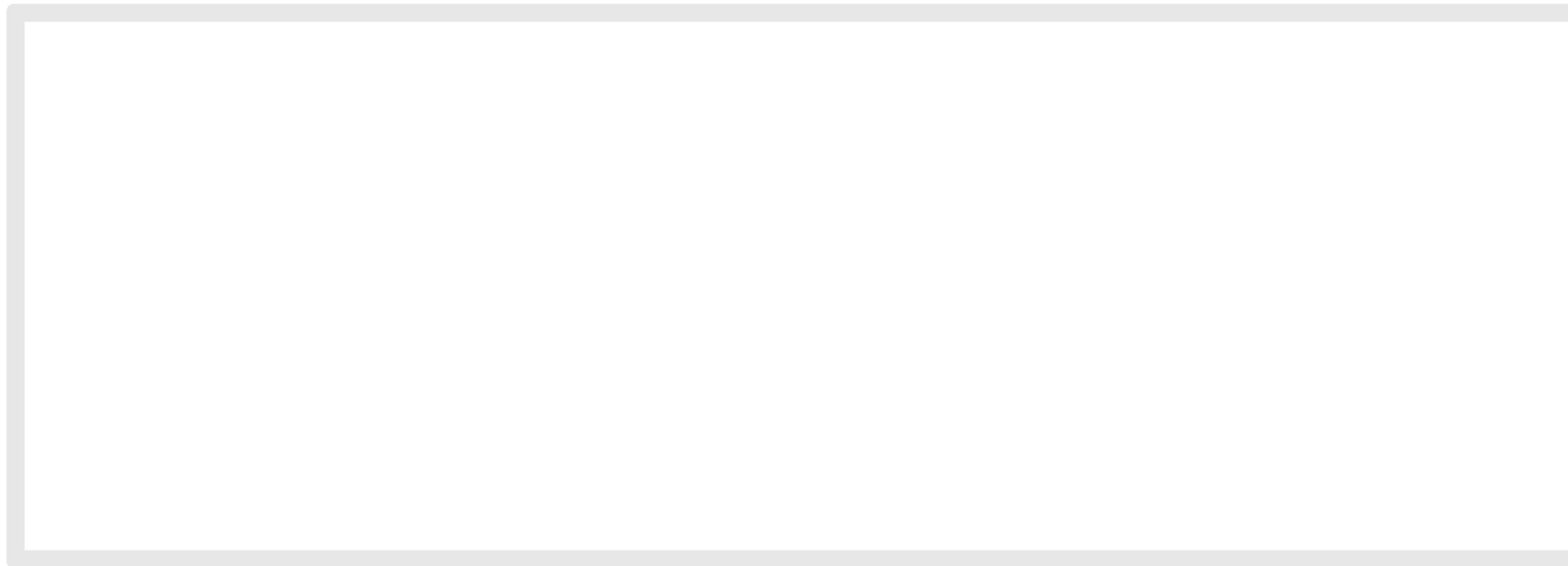
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"A lot of prominent people donated money and we wrote to growers asking for donations of flowers," Coffman said. "We thought we'd get a few hundred (roses). We got more than a thousand."

The first two phases of the garden, planted between 1997 and 2000, contain about 4,000 roses. The completion of Phase Three in 2005 and Phase in 2011 saw the garden grow to more than 9,000 roses (in about 300 varieties), making it the largest rose garden in the Southwest.

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It serves as a test garden for rose growers throughout the country seeking to establish resilient varieties of flowers that can stand up to desert heat.

The garden hosted the inaugural Sonoran International Rose Trials in November 2018. The trials examined roses grown in the garden over a two-year period. Roses for the next round of the trials were planted in December 2018.

What you can see at the garden

Roses, thousands of roses in just about every color imaginable. In addition to traditional reds, visitors will find white, yellow, orange, lavender and purple varieties.

Phase Three of the garden is devoted to veterans and military branches with pods dedicated to the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marines and Navy. The flowers have patriotic names such as About Face, America, Fourth of July, Peace, Purple Heart, Stars & Stripes and Veterans Honor.

Phase Four was designed around the themes of love, friendship, beauty and peace. It includes two heart-shaped beds and two circular beds with contrasting roses planted to create a peace symbol.

Throughout the garden, signs identify the types of roses. Some signs that allow you to connect via smartphone to a self-guided tour. (WiFi is available.)

When is the best time to go?

Peak viewing months are usually March, April, May, June, November and December. The bushes are heavily pruned in January and February and do not bloom in September and October and the garden isn't in bloom at those times.

Get involved

Visitors can do more than just smell the roses at the garden. On Saturdays in January and February, aspiring rosarians can learn to prune and care for roses from the volunteers who run the garden.

On the third Saturday of the remaining months, volunteers are invited to help maintain the facility.

Gardening clubs and other groups can call to arrange special classes and educational tours.

Rose Garden at Mesa Community College

Where: 1833 W. Southern Ave., Mesa.

When: Dawn to dusk daily.

Admission/accessibility: There is no admission charge. Portions of the gardens are packed soil, but most is grass. There are sidewalks along the length of the gardens.

Details: 480-461-7022, rosegarden.mesacc.edu (<https://rosegarden.mesacc.edu/>).

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