

Q&A WITH MELISSA HANSEN

By Donna Ahrens

For visitors to the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, a Melissa Hansen “sighting” is commonplace. As Volunteer Coordinator, she’s frequently at the Visitor Shelter or on the trails, helping with the day-to-day operations of the Garden. This spring, she’ll move into her next phase of volunteering, as a Legacy Steward. We spent a few moments talking with Melissa about the Garden and the Friends organization.

Q *How and when did your interest in gardening/wildflowers begin?* In the early 1980s, I moved to an apartment that included a patch of yard. It was there I began to become a gardener. A few years later, our first house gained me space, but also came with established gardens that helped me learn about the plants already in residence. As I watched plants emerge, I had to research those I didn’t know (gas plant [*dictamnus albus*] was one) and find out how to care for those I recognized but had no experience growing. I was not going to let a mature raspberry patch go improperly tended! In 1991, a move to another house with too much lawn coincided with the native plant movement gaining attention, locally and nationwide.

Q *How long have you volunteered at Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden?* I have lived in Golden Valley since 1991 and I knew the Garden was right here, but I did not visit until summer 2006. “All those wasted years!” was my first thought when I did visit—and by August I was a weekly volunteer. You could say I was smitten.

Q *You’ve been Volunteer Coordinator for five years. What role do volunteers play in the operations and offerings of the Garden?* The simple answer: a big one! For most visitors to the Garden, a Shelter volunteer is the most likely person they will interact with while visiting. Volunteers are in the Shelter or on the trails more hours per week than the staff are. They greet all who visit the Shelter and help with questions, directions and program scheduling. When not occupied with visitors, they do Shelter housekeeping, birdfeeder and birdbath tending and trail monitoring. There are two other groups of volunteers that the visiting public is less aware of: Legacy Stewards, the quiet figures that can be glimpsed eradicating invasive species off trail in the Garden and around the perimeter fence; and the small groups doing scheduled invasive plant pulls. These volunteers are truly gatekeepers for the Garden.

Q *What are a few events in the EBWG that you’ve found especially memorable?* It’s only been eight years since I’ve involved myself, so each season is different and special, but here are some favorite recollections. My second year of volunteering was the 100th Anniversary of the Garden. Among the many special events during the season was one that featured included a lovely actress portraying

Eloise Butler for the day. I’ve always wanted to see her return to the Garden and read more of Eloise’s words.

One early spring, my volunteer shift in the Shelter coincided with Susan [Wilkins, Garden Curator] and Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board staff burning the prairie. When my shift ended, I was allowed to walk through the prairie as it still smoked a bit, charred in every direction except on the paths. It was a magical scene. I happened to have a camera with me and enjoyed watching how quickly the prairie came back to life. I would look back through my burn photos and marvel.

Q *What do you see as the challenges and opportunities for the Friends of the Wildflower Garden?* I see a strong need to increase the size of our membership, to better support the Garden. Along with increasing in size, I like to imagine more events and programs for Friends members would be possible ... special walks, a book club of nature writing, winter meet-ups, and more.

Q *Is there anything else you’d like to pass along to the Friends of the Wildflower Garden?* Yes. Please help promote membership in the Friends organization. We all need to be active advocates for the Garden. And every year, bring one new person to the Garden to walk with you. ♦

—Donna Ahrens is a Shelter volunteer and copyeditor of the *Fringed Gentian*.



Melissa Hansen

Photo credit: Lars Hansen