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SMART

DEPARTMENT HELPS STATE'S ROADSIDES GET NATURAL LOOK WITH NATIVE PLANTS

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Once upon a time, Oregon roadsides were planted with European ornamental plants such as roses, flowering crabapple and euonymus. But the Oregon Department of Transportation has taken part in a quiet revolution that is changing that approach.

Department landscapers are planting native species instead, creating a more natural look for the state's roadsides.

At Lincoln Beach/Fogarty Creek on the Pacific Coast Scenic Parkway, the state recently put in native kinnikinnick and Sitka spruce.

The upcoming Chenoweth interchange in The Dalles will be surrounded by the same sagebrush and buckbrush that graces the surrounding hills.

Why this change? Last summer, President Clinton signed a memorandum requiring that federally funded landscaping include native plants.

But Oregon already had experimented with planting natives on several major projects.

"We found the natives cost less to maintain and sometimes are cheaper to plant," says landscape architect Paul Edgecomb of the transportation agency.

Already adapted to the climate and soil, these species rarely need the watering, trimming and feeding that ornamentals demand.

As budgets are cut, these argu-



MARY BONDINO/WZZ/The Oregonian

Paul Edgecomb, a landscape architect with the Oregon Department of Transportation, examines Oregon grape, one of the native plants used in landscaping along U.S. 26 near the Washington Park Zoo.

ments take on additional force. "It probably takes from \$40,000 to \$60,000 per acre to landscape with ornamentals," Edgecomb says, "and one person is required to maintain every 15 acres. Those resources simply aren't available anymore."

Tourism is another factor. "People come to Oregon to see Oregon," he says. "And that's what grows naturally by the roadsides."

Bonnie Harper-Lore, roadside vegetation coordinator for the Federal Highway Administration and supporter of the program, says Oregon's pioneering work with natives was a well-kept secret when she began her work in 1991.

"You were not the first to take this approach," she says, "but in activity, motivation and approach, you are among the top five states now."

Other recent projects in native plants include the Roseburg Interchange; Baker Road Interchange south of Bend; a portion of 99E between Southeast Portland and Milwaukie; the Stafford Road Interchange on I-5 in Wilsonville; and Edmundston Street in McMinnville.

The Sylvan/Camelot overcrossing of U.S. 26 will feature sustainable landscaping.

This transition takes time. Different nursery stock must be grown and prepared to survive under harsher conditions.

Instead of planting ornamentals in ground pretreated with an herbicide, landscapers are trying to emulate the sequence of plants that would grow if nature were allowed to take its course. That means planting appropriate, pioneering species that will give way over time to other

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TIPS

Here are some tips from the Oregon Department of Transportation for native gardeners:

- Buy your native plants from nurseries; don't dig them up from the wild. Not only will you be leaving the forest the way you want to find it, but nursery stock is likely to have better root systems and better survival rates.
- Use native material propagated and grown locally in soils and conditions as similar to the ones in your yard as possible. Survival will be greater.
- Don't fertilize. Native plants don't need fertilizer; failure to thrive may indicate that your garden conditions are simply too different from the conditions they require.
- Do prepare your soil well. "You're trying to get your plants to glue to the site," Paul Edgecomb says, "so prepare well beforehand."

This garden would delight the most finicky rabbit

If you think harvesting a giant pumpkin is difficult — the world record-holder weighed in at 990 pounds — try pulling up a carrot 16 feet, 10 1/2 inches long.

Bernard Lavery, a 58-year-old seedsman in Lincolnshire, England, has devised a method of growing championship root crops such as carrots in soil-filled drampipes strung on fences. He has gone to extraordinary lengths to produce leaks the size of small tree trunks and onions that could double as bowling balls.

The carrot was difficult to carry to a show, he says, "but the biggest problem was the 124-pound cabbage." He had to use a crane to lift it and a truck to transport it. (The vegetable would have weighed almost 50 pounds more, he says, but its outer leaves fell off en route.)

As a rule, the world of giant-vegetable growing abounds in closely held secrets, but Lavery has spilled the beans in a new book, "How to Grow Giant Vegetables" (HarperPerennial, \$12). The drainage notwithstanding, Lavery says, he counts on three basics: seeds bred to produce big plants, growing techniques that include lots of compost and watering, and luck against bad weather.

While growing giant vegetables is an enduring passion in Britain, the hobby is more regional in the United States and most often done in places such as Maine and Alaska, says George Ball, chairman of the W. Atlee Burpee seed company.

Like England, these northerly regions have a short growing season, remain cool and get plenty of daylight in summer. The arduous gardener can use these conditions to produce monster leeks, onions and other root crops, as well as such cool-season vegetables as cabbages and peas. Tomatoes, on the other hand, do well in hot, dry areas. The heaviest tomato recorded — 7 pounds, 12 ounces — was grown in Oklahoma.

"It's all a bit of fun really," Lavery says. "If you don't laugh when you see it, you have missed the point."