Garden paradise grows in Sierra City

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

Painters and photographers are making the long trek up Highway 49 again this summer to capture one perfect moment, maybe more.

They set up their easels or tripods near the bridge that arches gracefully over the spring-fed pond. They surround themselves with blooming rhododendrons and native azaleas in the forest shade. Or they focus on the majestic buttes that tower over this little valley and gleam in the late- afternoon sun.

All this makes Don Phillips smile. He loves sharing his Big Springs Gardens with others. He’s happy to see so many people enjoying it, too.

“People come up to me with almost tears in their eyes,” he said. “They tell me how beautiful it is and how wonderful that’s it’s open. That’s what keeps me going. I want to make it work.”

Big Springs Gardens is Phillips’ passion. On 113 acres surrounding his Sierra City home, he devoted 30 acres to a serene vision and a flower-filled forest with miles of trails and unforgettable views.

Read the whole story

Gene mutation to blame for the tasteless tomato

By Gina Kolata, New York Times

Plant geneticists say they have discovered an answer to a near-universal question: Why are tomatoes usually so tasteless?



Yes, they are often picked green and shipped long distances. Often they are refrigerated, which destroys their flavor and texture. But now researchers have discovered a genetic reason that diminishes a tomato's flavor even if the fruit is picked ripe and coddled.

The unexpected culprit is a gene mutation that occurred by chance and that was discovered by tomato breeders. It was deliberately bred into almost all tomatoes because it conferred an advantage: It made them a uniform luscious scarlet when ripe.

Now, in a paper published in the journal Science, researchers report that the very gene that was inactivated by that mutation plays an important role in producing the sugar and aromas that are the essence of a fragrant, flavorful tomato. And these findings provide a road map for plant breeders to make better-tasting, evenly red tomatoes.

Read the whole story

Best ways to help Colorado disaster relief

By Joanne Davidson, Denver Post

The outpouring of support for those impacted by the Colorado wildfires is nothing short of amazing.

However well-intentioned, though, an offer you might think is helpful can in fact create problems. From HelpColoradoNow.org, here are some helpful hints for would-be benefactors:

Donate only things that are requested by those in charge and bring them to the officially designated collection centers; items that are not needed may go to waste and get in the way of relief efforts.

Cash allows disaster agencies to purchase exactly what is needed.

Double-check before handing over cash or merchandise. For a list of reputable agencies, call 2-1-1 or 1-866-760-6489.

Read the whole story

Tahoe Tails – Adoptable Pets in South Lake Tahoe

Kitten season is here. There are 15 kittens at the shelter, with more sure to arrive in the coming weeks. Orange, gray, black, white, you have your choice. All are very playful and energetic, and are anxious to go to a home. Please consider

adopting two if you are able.



All kittens, as well as all of the other cats and dogs, are neutered, microchipped, and vaccinated. They are at the El Dorado County Animal Services shelter in Meyers, along with many other dogs and cats who are waiting for their new homes. Go online to see photos and descriptions of all pets at the shelter.

Call (530) 573.7925 for directions, hours, and other information on adopting a pet.

For spay-neuter assistance for South Tahoe residents, go online.

Ski resorts ban smoking for summer

Heavenly Mountain Resort, Northstar California Resort and Kirkwood Mountain Resort announced they are banning smoking at their resorts this summer due to dry and dangerous conditions.



Kirkwood, above, Heavenly

and
Northstar
have banned
smoking for
the summer.

At Heavenly, the smoking ban includes, but is not limited to, all activities related to the Gondola, Tamarack Express and Adventure Peak, as well as weddings and special events at the Aerial Tram and Lakeview Lodge. At Northstar, smoking is prohibited in all areas of the mountain, including all facilities at the resort. Smoking is only allowed in designated areas within the Village at Northstar. And at Kirkwood, smoking is prohibited in all areas of the mountain, including all company facilities at the resort.

The three resorts are owned by Vail Resorts.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• The Coon Street Boat Launch is extending its hours for the Fourth of July holiday. It be open from 7am to 10:30pm on July 3 to allow people to pull boats out following the Kings Beach Fireworks. The remainder of the week, the launch will be open regular hours of 7am to 7pm, according to the North Tahoe Public Utility District.

• The Board of Education of the Lake Tahoe Unified School District will accept applications and nominations, and then vote, to fill a vacancy for a Provisional Board Member during a public meeting on Aug. 7. The board term ends Dec. 6, 2013. Persons applying or nominated for the position must meet legal qualifications for Board members as detailed in Education Code

35107. In order to be considered for this vacancy, candidates should complete the “Candidate Information Sheet” along with a 200 word statement of qualifications by July 20. Interested candidates can call Angie Keil at (530) 541.2850 for more information.

Money available for nonprofits helping children

The El Dorado Community Foundation has funding in the amount of $57,000.00 available for granting specifically for the youth of the South Lake Tahoe Basin. These grants are made possible by the South Lake Tahoe Endowment.

The SLT Endowment is comprised of the Joan Rochelle Fund and South Lake Tahoe Area Fund at the Foundation.

The cabinet for the South Lake Tahoe Endowment Fund at the foundation is comprised of Mark Acri, Wendy David, Bob Novasel, Karen Houser and Doug Rosner. In the past five years, the cabinet has had the opportunity to grant more than $273,000 for the benefit of the people of South Lake Tahoe.

On Aug. 15, they will begin accepting nominations from nonprofit organizations, churches, schools and service organizations serving South Lake Tahoe whose programs enrich the lives of children in the area. Grants of up to $5,000 will be considered with funding issued in fall 2012.

If your organization has a qualifying program or you know of a program you would like to nominate for an award, you can

access an application and learn more about the foundation, its mission, its donors and its community leadership by going online.

Grant applications are due in to the El Dorado Community Foundation office, P.O. Box 1388, Placerville, CA 95667, by 5pm Sept. 15

Opinion: Fed data proves Gen Xers are losing economic ground

By Maria Panaritis, Philadelphia Inquirer

It was shocking enough to hear this week that median American family wealth in 2010 had plunged to 1992 levels. But imagine this equally alarming detail that didn't get headlines: Generation Xers – those who hit the workforce in the late 1980s and early 1990s – got more scorched than any other group.

Before laying out the ugly numbers, let's think about what this portends for anyone who ascribes to America's promise that kids can do better than their parents: If Gen X is failing, we all should be worried.

The Federal Reserve data behind this conclusion reinforces something I've been writing about for several years now, as a relatively lone voice in the nation's press corps: Gen Xers have been decimated financially at a fragile time, while forming households and raising young families, those ordinary

coming-of-age endeavors. Their massive loss of wealth occurred in “prime” earning years, when people squirrel away money to pay for bills down the road.

When, if ever, does this Lost Generation even start to catch up, considering the grim pace of economic recovery? Policymakers already are talking about cutting Social Security payments and other social safety-net benefits for Xers come retirement. This is a crisis in the making.

The Fed’s findings compound earlier research showing that, for years, this group of Americans born between 1964 and 1980 (though the agreed-upon definition varies) has been doing worse than the generation that preceded them.

Read the whole story

Moody’s: Gaming business gains may stall

By Steve Green, Las Vegas Sun

Moody’s Investors Service today warned that the stagnant U.S. economy could hurt the casino industry and that some newly opened casinos appear to be taking market share from competitors as opposed to growing the market.

In a “special comment” called “A More Cautious Consumer Steps Away from the Casino,” the debt-rating company said companies that could be hurt by these trends include Caesars Entertainment Corp., Cannery Casino Resorts LLC and CityCenter Holdings, all in Las Vegas.

These are among the companies that are highly leveraged or

facing significant near-term debt maturities that will have to be paid off or refinanced.

“Improving U.S. gaming revenue trends in place since the middle of last year appear to be stalling,” Moody’s said in its report. “Momentum began to slow in March, and then in May most jurisdictions reported outright declines in gaming revenue. That, along with weakness in consumer confidence, employment and retail sales, indicates the rebound in gaming has a high probability of stalling.”

Read the whole story

Gondola Fire threatened to take out South Shore 10 years ago

By Susan Wood

When up to 30mph winds ignited a hellish wildfire under the town gondola on Lake Tahoe’s busiest week a decade ago, firefighters, residents and stakeholders may have sought divine intervention in stopping the 673-acre blaze that threatened 550 structures, forced the evacuation of hundreds of people and cost more than $3 million to fight.

During four challenging days, they certainly got it – from Heavenly Mountain Resort, an army of firefighting resources including more than 1,700 in fire crews, successful emergency plans and a whole lot of water at their disposal.

Like the Angora Fire five years later, South Shore communities suffered no loss of life from the Heavenly Gondola blaze. This

one was presumed to have been sparked by a carelessly discarded cigarette out a gondola car window between towers 11 and 12 on July 2, 2002.



Kit Bailey, fire chief for the USFS in Tahoe, explains how the Gondola Fire burned. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The impact on those who fought the Gondola Fire and lived through its rage is remembered vividly.

No one may have internalized the crisis more than Kit Bailey, fire management officer for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit of the U.S. Forest Service.

Bailey, who has spent more than three decades fighting fires, including a stint in Oregon as a smokejumper, has seen it all. But to this day he remembers what intersection he was in when the call came over the radio. The fire officer seemed a little perplexed that any cigarette can start a fire, but he and other fire investigators had no doubt upon examining the area afterward. Some say the odds of a cigarette igniting a blaze are 1 in 10, but Bailey believes they could be even higher. No suspect has ever been fingered, despite lengthy interviews conducted of guests.

“It’s difficult for a cigarette to start one. It has to land

in the right spot in the right fuels," he said, while recently surveying the point of origin with *Lake Tahoe News*. Ironically, a cigarette butt lay close to the same spot as it did 10 years ago when the perfect storm formed.

"(Officials) were aware. They knew the potential was here. And all the conditions came together," he said, referring to heavy wind, a cigarette and a preceding dry winter with drought-like spring. "But one benefit to Lake Tahoe of having a fire here is the access to international resources. They moved the resources quickly. And I think there were lessons learned for the local fire departments."

On July 2, 2002, the winds were whipping and the town was filling up with tourists for the Fourth of July holiday as the 12:30pm call came from dispatch. Crews raced over to Montreal Road and negotiated the rocky terrain up the gondola line. Part of the territory is now home to the nation's first bistate park named after rancher Jack Van Sickle. It was tough getting the water line up to the fire until one was attached at Keller Road and trucks were brought up to the blaze from a South Tahoe Public Utility District service road.



The scar of the Gondola Fire 10 years later.

"We needed a continual supply (of water)," Bailey said.

The unrelenting wind hurled the fire in two directions. There

was a time when residents at the Saddle Road area watched intensely as it headed southwest toward their homes. They were not on mandatory evacuations, but were told to be ready.

However, the winds carried the bulk of the blaze east in a rage that spread from 2 acres to 25 in only an hour. With the amount of dry brush and trees and huge neighborhood lining the canyon, Kingsbury Grade became a hotbed of concern.

“We had small-scale wind shifts, but the predominant wind pushed it across the hill (east). That’s why it burned diagonal instead of up,” Bailey said, pointing to the swiping scar across South Lake Tahoe’s most recognizable ridge view.

Fire crews tried to conduct an “anchor and flank” to surround the fire from the back and pinch it off but “we couldn’t get in front of it,” Bailey lamented.

Instead, he knew its sporadic crowning at the top of the trees and consumption of hot-burning pine needles in a grove about halfway up the ridge east of the gondola line were going to spell trouble.

“When it flashed there, it burned more intensely. I thought: ‘Now we’re done’,” he said.

Ski resort helps

Fire crews and resources stepped into high gear as the blaze rolled into the North Bowl and Olympic chairlift areas of Heavenly’s ski resort.



Kit Bailey stands at the point of origin of the Gondola Fire.

Although the danger exists with flying operations in the wind, the Lake Tahoe Airport became grand central station is terms of helicopter drops. Residents and tourists watched six helicopters take constant triangular runs between the lake, the mountain and the airport to refuel. An estimated 300,000 gallons of water from Lake Tahoe were dropped on the fire.

Beyond the ample water source, Heavenly chipped in with its own trifecta of fire suppression.

Bailey said fire crews received much help from Lake Tahoe's features of winter – Heavenly ski runs served as perfect fire breaks and the resort's snowmaking guns blew out water used in the summer for irrigation. The mountain's lakes at the East Peak and Sky areas were on standby if necessary.

Jim Larmore, who was Heavenly's snow surface director at the time, recalled the fire as a successful challenge for which emergency response plans trains twice a year. These operations plans were set in motion quickly because the ski area was forced to contend with providing a safe evacuation of 200 people who were still on the gondola. Workers quickly stopped loading riders at the base, but continued to run the lift to the end point.

"Our first thing was to get people out of harm's way," Larmore

said.

From there, riders were shuttled over to the top of Kingsbury ahead of the fire and down to the Carson Valley. Highway 208 from the lake to the summit turnoff was closed to traffic.

Tourists taken elsewhere

Meanwhile, the Ridge Tahoe was dealing with its own issues as the resort was situated in the direct line of the predominant fire. Between operator Resorts West's four properties at the summit, 1,500 guests among its 376 units were evacuated due to the urging of then Tahoe Douglas Fire Chief Tim Smith when asked by the Ridge's Senior Vice President Dan Garrison.



Charred trees make it hard to believe the fire was in 2002.

"The conversation lasted less than a minute," Garrison told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The most startling reason Garrison believed the resort was in danger came when the management team met on the view deck of the clubhouse facing the lake and "ash began to land on the tabletops." Guests were told to grab their medicine and leave their food because "there is no time." Gas valves were shut off and water pumps floated in the pool.

One guest who refused to evacuate was told to provide the name of his dentist if he didn't leave. He later obliged.

When the sky darkened from the smoke, guests shuttled by bus were leaving as fire units arrived to line Ridge Club Drive. Fire crews took over and stayed at the resort overnight, while spot fires broke out on the property.

“I remember as I drove away I looked into my rearview mirror and behind one of our buildings a large pine tree was fully engulfed with flames. I said to myself: ‘Building 10 won’t be there in the morning.’ And while it sounds dramatic, tears rolled down my cheek. I’ve been with the property before it was a property starting in 1982,” Garrison recalled.

Lessons learned

In the end, with no deaths and property damage – the Ridge executive commended his quick-thinking staff, as did Larmore of Heavenly.

The aftermath set wheels in motion in fire prevention and recovery efforts.

No smoking signs were erected throughout Heavenly’s property. More fire hydrants and valves were installed with the ability to run a 2,500-foot water hose from the gondola mid-station down the mountain. The gondola cars were equipped with plastic plates over windows that do not allow cigarettes to be dropped out.

The community and agencies have planted trees, including a major effort put on by Heavenly and the Sugar Pine Foundation last October for Vail Resorts’ annual Echo Day. Volunteers placed more than 1,000 seedlings in the ground over a 10-acre span in the Van Sickle Bi-state Park.

“We certainly hope to see these newly planted sugar pine seedlings thriving 100 years from now,” Heavenly’s General Manager Pete Sonntag said in a statement released last fall.

A quarter of the gondola fire burned in the California Tahoe

Conservancy property endowed by Van Sickle to build the state park.

“In a way, the rocky nature of the gondola burn is a small blessing,” CTC’s top forester Brian Hirt admitted to *Lake Tahoe News*.

He explained how having less highly flammable chapparal growth in the rocks has allowed the new, small trees to grow faster. Usually, the overabundance of the underbrush hinders the tree growth.

“The good news is that there are quite a few trees establishing in the gondola burn, but the bad news is that the scar will take longer to appear healed,” Hirt said, adding the area is also “prone to erosion.”

The CTC pledged to continue to work with Nevada State Parks – the agency that spearheaded the opening of the 725-acre, day-use park. Much faith and love has gone into the building and restoration of the park, including a Lake Tahoe Stewardship Day that brought out people from many walks of life to participate in the burn-area cleanup.

The fire consumed 243 acres in Nevada and 17 of the Conservancy’s property designated for the park.

The day of the fire, CTC’s program analyst Bruce Eisner was preparing to tour the area with this reporter and instead found himself watching the blaze roar over the ridge from the Saddle Road area.

“Whoever threw the cigarette out of the gondola knew absolutely nothing about this bistate park,” he said.

Eisner said he was never concerned the fire would douse the hopes of the park forming as planned.

“I grew up in Southern California, so I’m well aware of how fast fire moves. But this was a first in being the closest

I’ve come to a wildland fire,” he said.