

Rotary Botanical Gardens

by Hunter Stanford

TO SAY THAT the Rotary Botanical Gardens in Janesville, Wisconsin, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, came from humble beginnings would be an understatement. What began as one man's vision of what could be created on the site of an abandoned sand and gravel quarry is now a 20-acre gem that attracts more than 100,000 visitors annually. At the Gardens, located about an hour southwest of Milwaukee, visitors can stroll through a variety of themed gardens, view the newest introductions of bedding plants showcased in attractively designed trial gardens, enroll in classes and programs for both adults and children, and enjoy community events throughout the year.

THE ROTARY CLUB CONNECTION

Robert Yahr, a retired orthodontist, came up with the idea of creating a public garden in the Janesville area in the late 1980s. He was walking through town one day when he stumbled across an abandoned quarry the city was using as a storage area and scrap yard—and that doubled as a BMX bicycle racetrack. According to Yahr, the idea to turn the eyesore into a garden was inspired by his recollections of botanical gardens he visited during a bicycling trip of Europe decades earlier. "I thought, they have them there, so why not here in Janesville?" he says.

An active member of the Rotary Club, a service organization with chapters all over the world, Yahr approached the two local Rotary Clubs about helping develop a botanical garden. Soon after, the clubs began putting together a proposal for the creation and design of the garden, and the idea took off. On May 2, 1988, the City of Janesville agreed to lease the site at no cost to the Janesville Rotary Foundation for a period of 99 years.

With the help of countless volunteers and the Rotary Clubs in town, a 10-year plan was put into effect to clear the land



The traditional Japanese Garden, shown at left in spring, was dedicated in 1992. One of its main features is the red Arched Bridge, above, which was fabricated from recycled light poles.



of debris. Because the site was a former quarry and had no topsoil, more than 800 truckloads of soil had to be hauled in before the layout of the garden could begin. As the project moved forward, engineers, carpenters, and contractors were brought in. Among the first projects tackled was the renovation of an old building that eventually became the Gardens' **Rath Environ-**

mental Center, housing a meeting room, library, solarium, and office space.

As a non-profit, 501(c)3 organization, the Gardens relies on admission fees, fundraising, members, and partnerships to maintain and improve the site. It also benefits from over 400 volunteers contributing 16,000 hours of service annually. "While our budget is small, our focused creativity with garden improvements and fund development have allowed us to offer a memorable experience for all of our visitors," says Mark Dwyer, director of horticulture at the Gardens.

CREATING A VARIETY OF GARDEN SCENES

From the start, the Rotary Clubs had in mind the creation of a series of internationally themed garden areas. The first to be completed was the **Japanese Garden**, formally dedicated in 1992. A highlight of this

garden is the Arched Bridge, which was built using repurposed light poles from the former Janesville Wastewater Plant. A nearby Japanese-style footbridge is a nod towards a centuries-old Japanese legend that a zig-zag in a walkway will keep out evil spirits, which can only travel in straight lines. The garden also features a koi pond, gate, waterfalls, and stone lanterns.

The Gardens now contain a total of 24 themed areas, including an **English Cottage Garden** and a **French Formal Rose Garden**. In addition to the international theme gardens, there is a **Gazebo Garden**, a fern and moss garden, a prairie garden, and an alpine garden.

Each year, the Gardens also features a number of rotating specialty gardens. Among this year's theme areas are a **Thomas Jefferson Garden** in Charlottesville, Virginia, inspired by the historic gardens of Monticello, and a **Pollinators' Garden** that showcases hundreds of different plants that host pollinators.

FOCUS ON EDUCATION

Dwyer, who has been director of horticulture at the Gardens since 1998, is a strong believer that gardens play an important educational role in communities. "We look at the gardens as an outdoor classroom," he says. "Everything we do is geared towards education." With that philosophy in mind, the Gardens has developed a number of

Additional Information

Rotary Botanical Gardens,

1455 Palmer Drive, Janesville, WI

53545. (608) 752-3885.

<http://rotarybotanicalgardens.org>.

■ Open daily year-round (hours vary by season; consult website for details).

■ Admission is free from November 1 to March 31; the remainder of the year: Adults \$5, Youths (ages 6 to 15) \$3, Children (under age 6) free. Rotary Botanical Gardens participates in the AHS's Reciprocal Admissions Program, so AHS members receive free admission as well as a discount at the gift shop.

Other nearby sites to explore:

Olbrich Botanical Gardens, Madison, Wisconsin. www.olbrich.org.

Anderson Japanese Garden, Rockford, Illinois. <http://andersongardens.org>.

programs for various youth groups, including Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, children, and adults. From April through November each year, the Gardens offers a weekly Story Stroll for families to enjoy seasonal stories and songs while touring the gardens.

Each May, the Gardens hosts local first and second graders for a two-hour program called "Taking a Closer Look

at Plants." "The program illustrates the different life cycles plants go through," says Kris Koch, education coordinator for the Gardens. "We want to show kids that what they eat doesn't just come from the grocery store." A similar event called the Pumpkin Program is offered in October for local third and fourth graders; this emphasizes math and measurement skills.

Events for adults and families coincide with various holidays, including garden brunches for Easter and Mother's Day, an Earth Day Celebration, a year-end Holiday Lights Show, and various seasonal plant sales.

SHOWCASING NEW PLANTS

In 2001, the Gardens initiated annual trial gardens to showcase the newest bedding plant introductions from many of the top plant and seed companies, sometimes before they are even released at retail garden centers. Unlike the trial gardens in many public gardens, the Rotary Botanical Gardens integrates the new annuals and subtropicals in designed beds and containers, providing colorful, creative compositions that offer visitors design ideas they can apply in their own gardens. "We have a lot of fun with it and our seasonal displays are totally different each year with various color themes and collections," says Dwyer.

The trial gardens include between 200 and 500 varieties that are installed in late May, evaluated three times during the growing season, then removed in mid-October. Other specialty collections include roses, ferns, hostas, and daylilies, as well as a demonstration garden for All-America Selections award winners.

CONTINUING TO GROW

Six themed gardens and a handful of educational programs have been added since Dwyer joined the Gardens, and he's confident more will be added in the coming years.

Yahr maintains an emeritus position on the Gardens' Board of Directors, but he now splits his year between homes in Janesville and Scottsdale, Arizona, so he's not as actively involved in the Gardens as he was in the past. When he is in Janesville, however, he can often be found walking the grounds.

Hunter Stanford is an editorial intern with The American Gardener.



The Sunken Garden is one of the 24 permanent themed gardens at the Rotary Botanical Gardens.

Horticultural News and Research Important to American Gardeners

KEEP AN EYE ON ETHANOL

Next time you fuel up your lawn mower, weed trimmer, or other outdoor power equipment, you could be breaking the law. You also may be risking personal injury or damaging the equipment next time you use

it. This is because engines in these tools are manufactured to handle only gasoline containing 10 percent ethanol (E10). However, gas stations nationwide have begun offering E15, which is illegal to use for anything other than passenger vehicles manufactured in 2001 and later. E35 and E85 for



“flex fuel” vehicles also may be available.

“Ethanol burns hotter and faster than petroleum,” explains Kris Kiser, president of the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI). “This can be especially dangerous in machines not meant to handle mid-level ethanol blends, where the machine will burn so hot the engine will accidentally engage without warning, known as unintentional clutch engagement.”

A survey OPEI conducted last year revealed a significant lack of awareness among American consumers about the safety and legality issues when using the different fuels. To educate the public about this problem, OPEI initiated a “Look Before You Pump” campaign aimed at the affected equipment’s users and dealers. The goal is to get consumers to pay closer attention to the ethanol level in the fuel they choose at the pump to ensure proper selection for their power tools.

Visit www.lookbeforeyoupump.com for more details.

TICKSEED TRIALS AT MT. CUBA CENTER

The Mt. Cuba Center, a public garden in Hockessin, Delaware, has released the results from its second year of trialing 27 selections of annual coreopsis, also known as tickseed, for garden performance and



ecological potential. Most of the tickseeds evaluated were hybrids developed from two American natives, plains coreopsis (*Coreopsis tinctoria*) and small rose tickseed (*C. rosea*). The latter is a perennial, but plant breeders include it in hybridization to take advantage of the pink hues of its flowers.

The five selections noted for superior garden performance are ‘Salsa’, ‘Jive’, ‘RP #1’ (Little Penny), ‘Pineapple Pie’, and *Coreopsis verticillata* ‘Golden Dream’. These top-performing cultivars received high marks for floral display, disease and pest resistance, and a sturdy habit that reduc-

es the tendency to flop after heavy rains, a common problem with annual coreopsis cultivars, according to George Coombs, assistant research horticulturist at the Mt. Cuba Center (USDA Hardiness Zone 6/7, AHS Plant Heat Zone 6). Also selected for special mention was the Lemonade™ series, a group of four cultivars that offered “electrifying chartreuse foliage” in the weeks prior to flowering.

Ten plants of each cultivar were evaluated weekly by Mt. Cuba’s horticultural staff. No pesticides were used during the test and the plants were only given fertilizer and supplemental water at the time they were planted. The trial area was in full sun with a clay-loam soil.

“It is our hope that the results of this trial will help to further promote the use of these plants, as there are very few annuals on the market that can claim to have a parentage native to the eastern United States,” says Coombs. “Their ability to attract a wide array of pollinators is also an important attribute, because many people are interested in providing habitat for these insects.”

To learn more about the coreopsis trials or the Mt. Cuba Center, visit the center’s website at www.mtcubacenter.org.



Researchers at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden grow orchids from seeds in a micro-propagation laboratory. After 18 to 24 months, the seedlings are planted in trees outdoors.

FLORIDA'S ENDANGERED NATIVE ORCHIDS BEGIN COMEBACK

Due to decades of illegal harvesting and habitat loss, wild populations of Florida's native orchids have become increasingly rare. The Million Orchid Project launched by Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables, Florida, aims to reverse this trend. The plan is to mass produce a number of epiphytic, or tree-dwelling, native species, which are notoriously challenging to germinate from seed. Then, the orchids will be glued into the canopy of South Florida's street trees, where they hopefully will establish



Encyclia tampensis is among the threatened native Florida species the Million Orchid Project is hoping to reestablish.

and thrive to such a degree that they will begin reproducing on their own.

To this end, Fairchild staff and volunteers have for more than a year been growing thousands of seedlings from three different species in the carefully controlled environment of its micro-propagation lab. The first of these plants were placed on trees around the Coral Gables City Hall this past April on Earth Day. Over the next five years, thousands more will be planted in urban areas around Miami-Dade County.

According to Fairchild Director Carl Lewis, the idea for this project came from the Singapore Botanic Gardens, which has been successfully planting orchids in street trees around Singapore for the last three decades. Nothing like this has been attempted in the United States, however. "This is all a big experiment to see whether we can restore rare plant species within the tree canopy layer above our cities," says Lewis.

Learn more about the Million Orchid Project on Fairchild's website at www.fairchildgarden.org.

CAUTION ADVISED WHEN GARDENING IN URBAN SOIL

When it comes to soil, most gardeners know to pay attention to its fertility and structure. But gardeners in urban areas also should be aware of potential soil contaminants. In a paper published in the online

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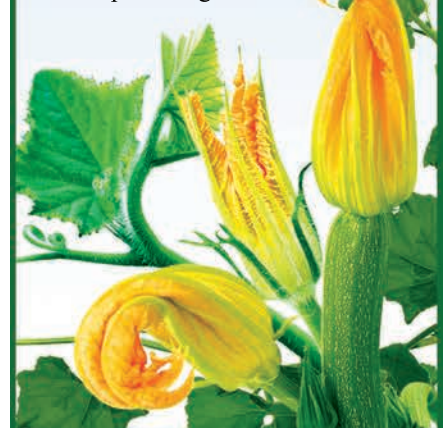
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PEOPLE and PLACES in the NEWS

Heronswood Homecoming for Dan Hinkley

Déjà vu alert! Dan Hinkley is back at Heronswood. The founder and former co-owner of the legendary Kingston, Washington, garden and nursery stepped away from the



Dan Hinkley, Heronswood's new part-time director

business in 2006, a few years after it was purchased by the Burpee Company. In 2012, the Port Gamble S'Klallam Indian Tribe acquired the property on Seattle's Kitsap Peninsula, and now the neglected and overgrown gardens are being cleaned up with a view to restoring Heronswood Garden to its former glory.

Recently appointed as part-time director of Heronswood, Hinkley says he's delighted to be a part of the team moving the garden forward. "I am leading twice monthly Talk, Walk

and Weed tours that have been bringing a small army of volunteers out," says Hinkley. "This has offered us an opportunity to make great strides forward, though it will take several years of hard work to bring the full shine back."

Hinkley and his partner, Robert Jones, created a thriving mail-order nursery business at Heronswood starting in

the late 1980s. By 2001, the nursery's catalog included more than 2,400 plants, many propagated from specimens growing in the display gardens Hinkley and Jones created at



Volunteers help restore the display areas at Heronswood Garden.

the nursery. Now, in full-circle fashion, many former Heronswood customers are sending back divisions of plants they purchased years ago to help repopulate the garden. "The response to our initial requests has been both staggering and extraordinarily generous," says Hinkley.

Visit www.heronswood.com for more information.

journal *PLOS ONE* in February 2014, researchers from the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future (CLF) in Baltimore, Maryland, note that urban soils can contain high levels of contaminants such as heavy metals because of their proximity to pollution sources. Exposure to these chemicals through gardening poses significant health risks, especially to children. However, the researchers' survey of community gardeners in Baltimore revealed a general lack of knowledge about these risks and how to minimize them.

Of the 70 survey respondents, only half said that they are concerned about soil contaminants when gardening in an urban environment. When asked to list likely hazardous contaminants, lead appeared to be the one that most of the gardeners were aware of; 66 percent named it while only 13 percent named pesticides, 19 percent mentioned petro-



Soil in urban areas such as this are often highly contaminated with heavy metals.

chemicals, and 11 percent listed asbestos and other building materials.

In response to what they would do if they found out their soil is contaminated, about half said they would stop growing produce in it, 29 percent would seek out more information, and a quarter didn't

know what they would do. Only three percent said they would continue doing what they had been doing.

Because relatively little research has been done on urban gardeners' perceptions of soil safety, the CLF researchers "believe the results of this study can be used as a starting point to inform educational interventions for reducing soil contamination risks among gardeners in a variety of urban contexts." For example, the survey responses indicated much confusion about soil testing, so developing ways to simplify the process and results could help increase the likelihood gardeners will try testing to detect contaminants.

To find out more about this issue, visit www.jhsph.edu/clf/urbansoilsafety.

News written by Editorial Intern Hunter Stanford with Associate Editor Viveka Neveln.