

Rutgers Gardens in New Brunswick, New Jersey

by Natalie Sheffield

IN 1916, Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, acquired a nearby 37.5 acre farm for only a dollar. Over time, the property that would become Rutgers Gardens gradually evolved into a base for peach, holly, and dogwood breeding programs and a site for trialing ornamental plants to assist the area's nursery industry. Today, Rutgers Gardens' primary focus has transitioned to providing garden displays and



Left: Visitors enjoy the irises in bloom during an open house day in 1939. Extension Specialist in Home Horticulture Donald B. Lacey replaced these mass iris plantings in the 1960s with the demonstration annual garden, above, which bears his name.

educational programs for the public on what is now about a 180-acre site, but the unique range of plants that have accrued on the property provide a window into its 100-year history.

GROUNDING IN RESEARCH

Until the last quarter-century, the property originally known as Hort Farm 1 was primarily used by Rutgers staff for agricultural research. "The public was never pushed out, but there was no shingle put up saying, 'Welcome, come in,'" explains Bruce Crawford, Rutgers Gardens' director. The only time the public was actively invited to visit was during times of the year when the research farm's collections of irises, chrysanthemums, peonies, and other nursery staples bloomed *en masse*.

Among the garden's claims to fame is North America's second largest *Ilex*

collection, the legacy of its notable holly breeding and trial program in the last century. Renowned plant breeder Elwin Orton, who joined the university in 1960, started out working with hollies, and then took on the challenge of trying to develop attractive, disease-resistant dogwoods by crossing native eastern dogwoods (*Cornus florida*) with the Asian *Cornus kousa*. The resulting Rutgers hybrid dogwood series, released in the 1990s, is still widely acclaimed and popular with home gardeners (for more on Orton's work, see the article on him in the September/October 2012 issue of this magazine).

The eventual transition from a university-funded research property to a public garden is due in large part to former Rutgers horticulture professor Bruce Hamilton. In the 1990s, when rumors circulated about the land's sale, Hamilton, along

with the Garden Club of New Jersey, advocated for the garden's preservation and generated public support. According to Crawford, without benefit of a budget or official support from Rutgers, Hamilton "just figured out how to make it happen," using volunteers, donations from the community, and plant sales.

PROGRAMS AND PRODUCE

Plant sales, now overseen by Rutgers Gardens' horticulturist Monica McLaughlin, still happen annually. These four-day events each spring draw plant lovers with a comprehensive stock of vegetables, annuals, and perennials either grown onsite or sourced from local nurseries. The garden has also begun a sustainable agriculture farm in collaboration with Rutgers University faculty and undergraduates, and with the help of interns it is producing its



These iconic green Adirondack chairs in the Edwin J. and Ida M. Otken Memorial Garden were inspired by an oversized rocking chair on the 1960s TV comedy show “Rowan and Martin’s Laugh In,” says Rutgers Gardens Director Bruce Crawford.

first vegetables this season. Surplus vegetables are donated to a local food bank, and the hope is to eventually open a farm-to-table restaurant as well.

Rutgers Gardens also supports the surrounding community by offering a broad range of educational programs tailored to adults with different levels of gardening expertise and also to children of all ages.

DISPLAY GARDENS

“It’s very much a strolling garden,” McLaughlin says of the current Rutgers Gardens displays. Guests can walk through

the diverse gardens, take photographs, and even hold events in the pavilion or log cabin built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the mid-1930s.

An extensive “forest” of evergreen bamboo, originally planted to provide winter protection for beehives, surprises and intrigues many visitors. McLaughlin says that, for most visitors, walking the trails through the three-acre forest “takes you outside of anything you’ve experienced.”

Another highlight for many visitors is the annual display in the **Donald B. Lacey Display Garden**, which incor-



A popular spot for weddings, the Lillian Koelsch Gazebo is also an inviting spot for visitors to relax.

Additional Information

Rutgers Gardens

130 Log Cabin Road, New Brunswick, NJ 08901. (732) 932-8451.
www.rutgersgardens.rutgers.edu

- Hours: Open all year 8:30 a.m. to dusk
- Admission: Free
- Rutgers Gardens participates in the AHS’s Reciprocal Admissions Program. AHS members with a current membership card receive discounts in the gift shop.

Other nearby sites to explore:

Grounds for Sculpture,
www.groundsforsculpture.org

Reeves-Reed Arboretum,
www.reeves-reedarboretum.org

Zimmerli Art Museum,
www.zimmerlimuseum.rutgers.edu

porates more than 100 plants, including All-America Selections winners. It is sure to feature a salvia variety or two, as McLaughlin considers them “indispensable...and great for pollinators.” Crawford planned the **Edwin J. and Ida M. Otken Memorial Garden** with two bright green, oversized Adirondack chairs as the focal point. These have become popular with visitors for photo opportunities and the sense of whimsy they bring to the garden. In winter, a dusting of snow sets off the varied shades and shapes of trees in the evergreen garden. The adjoining **Frank G. Helyar Woods** offer hiking trails and views of a neighboring lake.

PROMISING FUTURE

Rutgers Gardens’ tagline is “where the future of horticulture is grounded in our past,” and the master plan for its future takes the idea of history seriously. Crawford wants to rework existing garden areas in order to illustrate the evolution of plants on earth, so that “as you walk through the garden, you walk through time,” he says. For a garden with a long and storied past, this vision bodes well for the next 100 years. 

Natalie Sheffield is an editorial intern with The American Gardener.