

## Ashton Gardens: A Blooming Oasis

by Julia Polentes



Each spring, waves of colorful tulips welcome visitors to Ashton Gardens in Lehi, Utah.

**I**N LEHI, Utah—just 25 miles south of Salt Lake City—a splash of green interrupts the arid landscape. This is Ashton Gardens, the centerpiece of Thanksgiving Point Institute, a non-profit, family-centered learning complex founded by Karen and Alan Ashton. The gardens span over 55 acres, boasting features such as the largest artificial waterfall in the Western Hemisphere and 15 unique themed areas that delight visitors from far and wide.

### A FAMILY AFFAIR

Following a computer science career that included the co-founding of a successful software company, Alan Ashton turned his attention to other projects. His wife, Karen, loves the outdoors and had always dreamed of having a big, beautiful garden. Together, they decided to create a garden to share with their community.

The plans for the garden soon expanded to include two museums and a demonstration farm, which are now part of Thanksgiving Point Institute. Named in reference to a Bible verse, the organization's mission is to draw upon the natural world to "cultivate transformative family learning." Although the garden initiated the whole institute, it was the final component to open—in 2000—reflecting the immense care and thought that went into creating it.

Before breaking ground, Karen and landscape architect Leonard Grassli toured gardens around Europe for inspiration. Some of these European influences are evident at Ashton Gardens, from the stately fountains in the **Italian Garden** to the elaborate **Parterre Garden**. Garden Director Esther Henrichsen notes that Ashton Gardens also pays tribute to its own American heritage through its programs. "The Pony Express went right through our garden, and the Overland Trail," she explains. "Before that,



**Top:** The lushness of Ashton Gardens makes a striking contrast to the desert scrubland and mountains around it. **Above:** The ornate cascading fountains of the Italian Garden are inspired by designs from gardens of 16th-century villas in Tivoli.

some areas were summering grounds of local Native American tribes.”

## GREENING THE DESERT

With only 14 inches of rain a year, Lehi can be a challenging place to garden. This means that Ashton Gardens must be “very careful with our water,” says Henrichsen. And, in some ways, the surrounding environment is actually an asset. “The sagebrush-colored hills beyond the gardens contrast sharply with the garden foliage.

It’s really striking,” she points out. Additionally, the dry climate is ideal for the many varieties of roses that populate the **Rose Garden**.

The gardens have also made efforts to adapt to Salt Lake Valley’s climate, providing an example for locals looking for water-thrifty options for their own landscapes. In the past year, a dry garden was created, showcasing many regional natives. These include several species of both penstemon and buckwheat (*Eriogonum* spp.),

## Additional Information

**Ashton Gardens**, 3900 N. Garden Drive, Lehi, Utah 84043. (801) 768-2300. [www.thanksgivingpoint.org](http://www.thanksgivingpoint.org).

- Hours: Open March 25 through October 28, Monday through Saturday. 9 a.m.–7 p.m.
- Admission: Adults \$15; seniors and children (3–12) \$12; 2 and under free. Add \$5 to admission during Tulip Festival.
- Ashton Gardens participates in the AHS’s Reciprocal Admissions Program. AHS members showing a current membership card receive free admission (home address must be further than 90 miles from garden).

Other nearby sites to explore:

**Red Butte Garden**, Salt Lake City, UT. [www.redbuttegarden.org](http://www.redbuttegarden.org).

**Timpanogos Cave**, American Fork, UT. [www.nps.gov/tica/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/tica/index.htm).

**Tracy Aviary**, Salt Lake City, UT. [www.tracyaviary.org](http://www.tracyaviary.org).

four-winged saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), Oregon boxleaf (*Paxistima myrsinifolia*), and thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*). It also makes use of more than 12,000 species tulips, which thrive in the harsh conditions similar to those of their native Middle Eastern mountains.

## TULIP TIME

Ashton Gardens is well known for its annual **Tulip Festival**, and for good reason. This year the festival will run from April 14 through May 6, featuring over 300,000 tulip bulbs in bloom—hundreds of varieties—along with over a million perennials, annuals, and flowering trees throughout the gardens. Last year, the event drew more than 100,000 people, and even greater numbers are expected this year.

In addition to the tulip festival, the gardens offer several other family-friendly events throughout the year, including a storytelling festival in August, a scarecrow festival in the fall, and Luminaria, a spectacular year-end display of lights and holiday festivities.

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