

## Cheekwood Estate & Gardens in Tennessee

by Mackenzie Nichols

**I**N THE 1920S, Leslie and Mabel Cheek purchased a sprawling estate in Nashville, Tennessee, where they intended to create a private residence. They named it “Cheekwood”—a combination of their last names—and began working with one of the era’s renowned architects, Bryant Fleming, who drew inspiration from the English countryside to design their mansion and landscape. Now, nearly a century later, Cheekwood is a cherished public destination that draws more than 200,000 visitors each year with its elegant gardens and diverse art collection.



**Above:** Cheekwood's mansion is strategically positioned to be seen from most perspectives in the gardens. **Right:** A colorful “river” of flowering tulips in the Robinson Family Water Garden leads to a picturesque pond.

The transition from private estate to public treasure began in 1957 under the guidance of the Cheeks’ daughter, Hulda Sharp, who inherited the property from her parents. Around this time, the Nashville Museum of Art shut down and donated its art collection to the estate. In May 1960, Cheekwood opened as a public garden and fine arts center where visitors enjoy the permanent collection, with its emphasis on 20th century American art, as well as traveling art exhibits.



### DIVERSE GARDENS

Present-day Cheekwood comprises several themed garden areas across 55 acres. Among the first sights for visitors is the **Bradford Robertson Color Garden**, which features seasonal displays such as thousands of blooming bulbs in spring and warm-hued chrysanthemums in fall. For the summer, “we’ve been incorporating tropical plants and some other new annuals to the mix,” says Sarah Lowe,

Cheekwood’s botanical garden and horticulture manager.

From here, visitors may explore areas originally designed for the Cheeks by Bryant Fleming. These include the terraced formal gardens surrounding the Georgian-style mansion, which feature a stone grotto, wisteria arbor, and reflecting pool among billowing boxwood hedges.

Another area with an intriguing past is the **Howe Garden**. Beginning in the



The pavilion in the Shomu-en Japanese Garden overlooks a yard of raked gravel.

1920s, avid Nashville gardener Cora Howe spent nearly 40 years creating her eight-acre private garden with a wide variety of flowering trees and shrubs, as well as more than 100 species of wildflowers mostly native to Tennessee. Known as "Wildlings," it became a popular attraction. After Howe's death, fellow members of the Garden Club of Nashville replicated "Wildlings" on the Cheekwood property to preserve her horticultural legacy.

More contemporary gardens complement these historic landscapes, such as the **Shomu-en Japanese Garden**, created in 1990. It consists of four parts: the roji (crooked path), the dark bamboo forest, the ginkgo and maple courtyard complete with a tranquil water feature, and a pavil-

ion overlooking raked gravel that simulates a body of water.

Other areas focus on particular types of plants, such as the **Herb Study Garden** and the **Wills Perennial Garden**. Cheekwood is also home to a nationally accredited collection of dogwoods (*Cornus spp.*), certified by the Plant Collections Network of the American Public Gardens Association. Primarily located in the **Carell Dogwood Garden**, it includes over 250 trees and shrubs representing 13 different species.

### CELEBRATING THE SEASONS

Each spring kicks off with Cheekwood in Bloom, running this year until April 15. Visitors during this time will be surrounded by thousands of bulbs, blooming in a suc-

### Additional Information

**Cheekwood Estate & Gardens,**  
1200 Forrest Park Drive, Nashville, TN  
37205. (615) 356-8000.  
[www.cheekwood.org](http://www.cheekwood.org).

- Hours: Tuesday to Sunday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Admission: Adults \$20; seniors (65+); \$18; college students \$16; youth (ages 3–17) \$13; ages 2 and under free.
- Parking: \$5 per vehicle.
- Cheekwood participates in the American Horticultural Society's Reciprocal Admissions Program. AHS members showing a current membership card can enjoy free admission and free parking.

Other sites to explore in Nashville:

**Belle Meade Plantation,**  
[www.bellemeadeplantation.com](http://www.bellemeadeplantation.com).  
**Centennial Park,**  
[www.nashville.gov/play.aspx](http://www.nashville.gov/play.aspx).  
**Nashville Zoo at Grassmere,**  
[www.nashvillezoo.org](http://www.nashvillezoo.org).

sion of vibrant colors, along with flowering shrubs and trees. Special weekend activities include spring-themed crafts for the whole family, guided tours, and live music. This event will be followed by "Cheekwood in May," a new month-long festival. It will feature an outdoor art exhibition of gargantuan, inflatable rabbits—symbolizing the global issue of invasive species—by Australian artist Amanda Parer. Cheekwood's harvest festival with pumpkins galore in autumn and its holiday lights display in winter keep the fun going through the end of the year.

### A CULTURAL GEM

While preserving and celebrating the Cheeks' historic estate and gardens, Cheekwood simultaneously caters to modern audiences through interactive events and exhibits and continues to expand its outdoor spaces. One major addition on the horizon is the two-acre **Bracken Foundation Children's Garden**, scheduled to open next year. Visitors to Cheekwood will enjoy its diverse gardens and natural beauty, as well as its rich cultural experiences for all ages.

*Mackenzie Nichols is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.*



Visit the Howe Garden for a chance to step back into Nashville history with its replicated version of renowned local gardener Cora Howe's garden, including its thatched roof tool house.