

## RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

# Huntsville Botanical Garden

by Rachel de Rosset

**L**OCATED IN northern Alabama, Huntsville Botanical Garden (HSVBG) enjoys the mild winters that characterize this part of the Gulf Coast region. The flip side, according to Tracy Cook, the garden's horticulture manager and assistant curator, is exposure to the region's well known "weather extremes, such as drought, severe storms, and prolonged seasonal wetness." As a result, it is a tall order to keep the garden looking its best. Fortunately, through sophisticated irrigation systems, microclimate effects, and extensive use of native species that are already "locally adapted," Cook and her team ensure that even with these weather and climate challenges, the garden remains a serene refuge for plants, wildlife, and people alike.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The garden's origin's trace to 1979, when 14 Alabama garden enthusiasts formed the Huntsville–Madison Botanical Garden Society with the intention of garnering support to create a botanical garden. Upon petitioning the city council, the Society received 35 acres and three years to raise \$200,000, which the city agreed to match. Through the tireless efforts of many volunteers, they succeeded. In October 1985, Society members planted a southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) to dedicate the new Huntsville–Madison County Botanical Garden, later renamed the Huntsville Botanical Garden. Since opening in 1988, the HSVBG has grown to 112 acres and boasts 70 full-time staff members, 3,356 volunteers, and over 360,000 yearly visitors.

### UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS

HSVBG is home to the nation's largest open-air butterfly house, **Purdy Butterfly House**, where visitors can walk amid



Top: Throughout the year, visitors can join HSVBG staff in releasing butterflies inside the Purdy Butterfly House, which showcases a variety of Alabama's natural habitats. Above: The pavilion at Damson Aquatic Garden looks out to ornamental beds and a spectacular pool filled with aquatic plants such as giant water lilies, water lotus, and papyrus.

## Additional Information

### Huntsville Botanical Garden

4747 Bob Wallace Ave. SW  
Huntsville, AL 35805  
(256) 830-4447  
<http://hsvbg.org>

- Hours: **Apr.–Sept.:** Mon.–Thurs.: 9 a.m.–7 p.m.; Fri. & Sat.: 9 a.m.–6 p.m.; Sun.: 11 a.m.–5 p.m.
- **Oct.–Mar.:** Mon.–Sat.: 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; Sun.: 11 a.m.–5 p.m.
- Admission: Members: free; see website for regular and special admission pricing.
- RAP benefits: Free admission, free parking.

thousands of butterflies—in addition to turtles, button quail, and frogs—from May through September. An additional treat for young visitors and family groups is the **Children’s Garden**, a two-acre wonderland that includes a dinosaur dig, a Space Station node—a passageway section of a space station—donated by nearby Marshall Space Flight Center, storybook garden, maze, and more.

Other notable attractions include the **Four Seasons Garden**, a collection of Tennessee Valley plants arranged in borders to reflect the seasons; **Damson Aquatic Garden**, a formal garden built around a mirrorlike pool; **Lewis Birding Trail**, devoted to conservation, education, and enjoyment of birdlife in diverse ecosystems, from meadows and forests to wetland and azalea gardens; and the **Loretta Purdy Spence Volunteer Tribute Garden**, which was planted in honor of the volunteers who helped build the garden from scratch.

### CELEBRATING COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

“Our mission here is to inspire people to sow, grow, and discover,” says Katherine MacGilvray, marketing manager. “That is why we always look for ways to celebrate our community and showcase other cultures through exhibits.” One of the top draws among these annual events is the **Galaxy of Lights**—a series of custom-created animated light displays for the holiday season—which attracts over 140,000 visitors each year. Seasonal garden activities, including a scarecrow trail, pumpkin display, hayrides, and a

## HOW THE RECIPROCAL ADMISSIONS PROGRAM (RAP) WORKS

This American Horticultural Society program is designed to encourage people to visit gardens, arboreta, and conservatories while traveling. As a current member, you receive free admission and/or other special discounts at more than 320 sites throughout North America! Here’s how to make the most of this member benefit:

- View the current list of participating locations and the RAP benefits they offer at [www.ahsgardening.org/rapgardens](http://www.ahsgardening.org/rapgardens). This list is also published in a booklet. To order, visit <https://www.ahsgardening.org/gardening-programs/rap>.
- Contact the garden to confirm the RAP benefits it offers. (Some sites may choose to enforce a 90-mile exclusion policy; if your zip code falls within that distance from the location, you would not receive the offered RAP benefits there.) Admission to special events may also be excluded.
- Present your current membership card at the admissions counter or gift shop to receive the RAP benefit(s) offered by that garden. Each card will only admit the individual(s) listed on the card. In the case of a family, couple, or household membership card that does not list individual names, the garden must extend the benefit(s) to at least two members; it is at the garden’s discretion to extend benefits to more than two individuals. Some gardens may require a photo ID.



A bottle tree—a traditional Southern garden motif—marks the Lewis Birding Trail.

corn maze, are community staples every autumn.

The garden also hosts yearly events that have a cultural theme, such as the **Chinese Lantern Festival** that drew over 118,000 visitors this past spring. For 2020, the HSVBG staff members will present **ZimSculpt**, “an award-winning exhibit featuring the larg-

est collection of Shona sculpture in Zimbabwe.” The exhibit will include over 100 large sculptures, daily sculpture demonstrations, and a marketplace featuring artisanal and craft vendors

Apart from its exhibits, HSVBG interacts with its neighbors in other ways. “From supporting schools with field trips to educating our community on native plants with the help of staff, volunteers, donors, and sponsors,” says Melissa Riley, vice president of guest services, “we touch and are touched by our community every day.” The garden also partners with local charities and non-profits to provide free garden admission in exchange for donated items on “Give Back Days.”

### LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

The HSVBG is committed to expanding its garden and outreach, and the garden’s relationship with the American Horticultural Society (AHS) is an integral part of this effort. “There is such a special relationship between public gardens through the AHS’s Reciprocal Admission Program,” says MacGilvray. “Together, we form a trail across the U.S. and Canada that connects people to our core values. The more we encourage visitors to see other gardens, the more successful we become in our shared mission to connect people to plants.”

*Rachel de Rosset is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.*