NESTLED WITHIN 460 acres in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden (PBG). The garden, which opened on a permanent basis in 2015, is a relatively new addition to the Pittsburgh area but has already proven to be a valuable gem for the community.

While only 60 acres of the extensive property have been developed so far, the garden offers a range of serene garden areas, three miles of wooded trails, family-fun exploration stations, and a restored historic homestead that visitors of all ages enjoy. With 400 more acres to transform, PBG will continue to become “a special place of beauty for the community to connect with native plants and experience nature,” says Keith Kaiser, PBG’s executive director.

REVITALIZING THE LAND
The garden itself may be newly opened, but the vision for PBG sprouted decades ago. In 1988, a group of local horticulturists and green industry members came together with a desire for Pittsburgh to have an outdoor public garden. Their collaborative efforts in the 1980s eventually led to the leasing of 460 acres of abandoned coalmine land from Allegheny County. Before the vision of the garden could become a reality, however, strong reclamation efforts were needed to restore the bleak acreage left from western Pennsylvania’s industrial past. With unrelenting determination, the work to revitalize the land and restore it to its pre-industrial splendor was set in motion.

Most notable is the transformation of the lotus pond located in the garden’s Asian Woodlands. When the property was acquired, the pond was a dreary, highly acidic body of water contaminated by coalmine drainage. Following the implementation of an innovative water treatment system, the pond is now teeming with a freshwater ecosystem of water lilies, insects, fish, and frogs. Ongoing work to create new gardens and restore degraded woodlands and water ecosystems remains an important objective for PBG.

PROMOTING VISITATION
In addition to its focus on the environmental remediation of the land, PBG is strongly committed to providing a space for all visitors to enjoy. “As one of many places in the Pittsburgh region where individuals choose to spend their free time, we strive to connect with the local and regional residents, including tourists, to our region,” says Beth Exton, development director. In addition to the crowd-favorite lotus pond, the Margaret Lawrence Simon Dogwood Meadow is also a signature garden spot. This eight-acre meadow features an impressive stand of native flowering dogwood (Cornus florida). When the trees bloom in April and early May, visitors enjoy the spectacle of what Kaiser describes as “a big white cloud that landed on the landscape.”

Visitors can explore the roots of the region and learn about pioneer life in

For years, acid residue flowing from nearby abandoned mines left this pond lifeless. Today, the restored lotus pond is full of aquatic plants and wildlife and is a popular destination for visitors.

Rachel Gattis, Pittsburgh Botanic Garden, walks visitors through the garden's Asian Woodlands.

Constructed in the 1780s, the Walker-Ewing-Glass log house, the former home of a pioneer family, now serves as an educational space.
the Allegheny Plateau at the garden’s restored Heritage Homestead—featuring a historic log house, a heritage apple orchard, pioneer garden, and chicken coop. The garden’s event center—a renovated 1870s barn—also serves as a symbol of the land’s agrarian past. Additionally, seasonal events such as Dogwood Days and Autumn in the Garden, as well as educational programs for all ages, help foster an appreciation of the outdoors. Nature Passport, a hands-on children’s garden activity, and a year-round Yoga in the Garden Series for adults are just a few of many offerings.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT
With the success of the 60-acre woodlands, PBG is excited to continue converting its remaining 400 acres into an idyllic place of thriving beauty and environmental stewardship. According to Kaiser, the most remarkable aspect of the garden is “the transformation of the land from its former state to what it is becoming.” New additions like the Hillside Pollinator Garden, which opened in 2019, teach visitors about native plants and how to provide a nourishing habitat for pollinators. This year, PBG will also unveil new garden areas that continue to strengthen the garden’s mission. The 2020 additions—a new Welcome Center, Auto Garden, and Garden of the Five Senses—will enhance the visitor experience and connect people of all abilities with plants. In particular, the Garden of the Five Senses will be a sensory garden boasting interactive features. “The idea for this garden stemmed from the need to provide an outdoor learning/play space accessible for all ages and abilities,” says Exton. “When this garden opens Mother’s Day weekend, visitors including families, caregivers, and special needs individuals will feel welcome.” In time, the garden hopes to “serve as one of the premiere public gardens where the beauty and knowledge of our collection of plants from the Allegheny Plateau are shared with the public.”

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