

RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

Overland Park Arboretum & Botanical Gardens

by Charlene Chuquillanqui



Additional Information

Overland Park Arboretum & Botanical Gardens

8909 West 179th Street
Overland Park, KS 66013
(913) 685-3604
www.opkansas.org/recreation-fun/arboretum-botanical-gardens

Note: Overland Park's buildings and offices were closed at the time we went to press, but the gardens and trails were open. Please visit the park's website or call ahead to check open status before visiting.

- Hours: Open seven days a week. **Oct. 1–Apr. 9:** 8 a.m.–5 p.m.; **Apr. 10–Sept. 30:** 8 a.m.–7:30 p.m.
- Admission: Members: free; ages 6–12: \$1; ages 13 and over: \$3; free admission on Tuesdays.
- RAP benefits: Free admission.

LOCATED LESS than 30 minutes south of Kansas City, Overland Park is a thriving Midwestern city whose residents enjoy access to numerous museums and other cultural attractions, including the popular Overland Park Arboretum and Botanical Gardens.

Since its founding in 1990, the arboretum—as it usually referred to for short—has flourished as an educational, recreational, and cultural resource and has become a treasured oasis for the Kansas City metropolitan area. According to Karen Kerkhoff, Arboretum Supervisor, the overall mission of the arboretum is “to provide both a cultural center and a nature preserve for the community”

while supporting an “advancement of environmental education, recreation, and the appreciation of nature.” With an array of themed gardens, meandering wooded trails, open prairieland, a diverse sculpture collection, and educational activities and events, the arboretum’s large expanse celebrates nature in a multitude of ways and captivates visitors of all ages year round.

SHOWCASING GARDEN DIVERSITY

The arboretum’s site encompasses a total of 640 acres, but over half that area is devoted to a variety of natural ecosystems that are being preserved and restored and are not open to the public.

Of the remainder, about 40 acres are divided into 13 themed gardens that include the **Erickson Water Garden**, home to lush pollinator plants, wildflowers, and ornamental grasses surrounded by babbling brooks; the **Marder Woodland Garden**, which features a paved path through a mature woodland planted with an extensive array of shade-loving native plants such as pawpaws, dogwoods, ferns, jack-in-the-pulpit, and mayapples; the **Cohen Iris Garden**, which offers a vibrant display of over 300 iris varieties; and the **Xeriscape Garden**, which showcases a variety of plants grouped by their water needs to demonstrate water conservation and to highlight the functionality of water-efficient gardens.

Over the years, the **Train Garden** has become a signature attraction, delighting

Above: The Monet Garden is planted in the style of Monet’s famous garden in Giverny. A sculpture of the artist seated at his easel can be glimpsed in the distance, upper right.

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 330 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. 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.

children and adults alike. Native plants such as little bluestem, big bluestem, and black-eyed Susans encircle a full-size railroad crossing gate, a caboose, and model train tracks carrying tiny trains that wind through streams, rocks, and a miniature model of downtown Overland Park.

Young visitors also enjoy the **Children's Discovery Garden** where they can explore a switchgrass maze, traverse along a vine-covered shrinking tunnel, visit a frog pond, and much more. Another fre-

quented spot for visitors is the enchanting **Monet Garden**, which features a picturesque replica of the green arched bridge, weeping willow, and lotus pond found in Monet's original garden in Giverny, France, transplanted into a Kansas setting. Completing the garden is a sculpture of Monet himself, seated at an easel and as he intently paints the garden in front of him.

The arboretum also highlights the special connection between art and nature that Overland Park fosters through

a growing collection of sculptures in the **International Sculpture Garden**. Visitors can leisurely stroll along a half-mile paved loop while viewing a series of unique, large-scale sculptures on permanent display among the woodlands.

CONNECTING THE COMMUNITY TO NATURE

Much of the remaining 300 acres of the arboretum consists of serene forested areas and peaceful prairieland that visitors can explore via winding paved and unpaved trails. Along the way hikers and runners pass through different ecosystems—including dry oak savanna, dry oak hickory, mesic oak-hickory forest, riparian woodland, wooded draws, and dry wooded swales.

The woodlands are also filled with wildflowers and according to Kerkhoff, over 45 species can be seen along the trails. "In addition, we have developed our own list of 'Arboretum Champion Trees' and visitors are invited to hike the trails to locate these largest species on site," she adds.

The arboretum hosts a variety of educational activities and seasonal events to connect the local community with nature. For instance, the arboretum provides visitors with "Adventure Packs," such as the "Tour of the Trees: A Self-Directed Guide" and "Junior Guide to a TREEmendous Adventure." Additionally, "Activity Cards" on various topics including animal tracks, insects, and herbs have been popular among school groups, homeschoolers, and families. Seasonal events such as "Nights at the Arboretum" also allow families to enjoy time exploring the outdoors together. An annual Plein Air Paint and Sunset Paint invites artists to express their creative abilities while painting the gardens of the arboretum.

Overall, the arboretum has much to offer its visitors. "It's interesting to watch the path visitors take, as some head straight for the four miles of mulch trails and never visit the gardens," notes Kerkhoff. "Others have only seen the gardens." However visitors choose to spend their time at the arboretum, they are sure to find an abundance of beauty and tranquility around them.

Charlene Chuquillanqui is a freelance writer and former editorial intern for The American Gardener.



In the Train Garden, visitors can view model trains winding through a landscaped setting that includes a miniature replica of downtown Overland Park from a previous era.