

RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

Western Kentucky Botanical Garden

by Mary Yee

WHERE CAN you see a 21-foot-tall steel flower basket, an herb garden with an authentic 19th-century country doctor's building, and an American Daylily Society national display garden with 800 named hybrid varieties? They—and a lot more—are at the Western Kentucky Botanical Garden (WKBG) in Owensboro, located on the banks of the Ohio River.

HOMEOWN AMBITION

Begun in 1993 when William “Bill” Tyler, a physician, and his wife, Susie, donated eight-and-a-half acres of a former soybean field to Owensboro to found a non-profit botanical garden, WKBG is truly homegrown. “The garden was started with absolutely no funds,” says Tyler, who has since retired from medical practice. “We had the idea that ‘If you build it, they will follow’—and they did.” Through fundraisers and with horticultural advisors, donations, community support, and a corps of dedicated volunteers, the WKBG has been able to develop 13 theme gardens and a variety of educational opportunities.

The Tylers are active in running the garden. Susie serves as director, and Bill, who is a Master Gardener and a Board member, oversees garden operations. Throughout the garden, you'll notice the names of many local supporting companies and individuals attached to the theme gardens, sculptures, and structures, testimony to the organic way in which the WKBG has evolved. With only a handful of part-time staff, the WKBG still depends largely on volunteers to operate.

GLORIOUS DAYLILIES

Bill Tyler has been a longtime daylily hybridizer, so it should come as no surprise that hybridized daylilies form WKBG's largest plant collection. Recognized by the American Daylily Society,



the **Daylily Display Garden**, built upon donated plants and opened in 1998, has become the centerpiece of WKBG's biggest annual event, a weeklong Dazzling Daylily Festival held each June when the plants are in full bloom. The festival features music, food, daylily sales, hot air balloons, and garden tours. The event attracts about 1,000 visitors, including day-

Above: The Country Doctor's Office looks out over hundreds of daylilies in early summer bloom in the Daylily Display Garden. **Left:** The Herb Garden is composed of several themed areas, including the Peony Walk.

lily enthusiasts from across the country.

Other notable collections at WKBG include new and antique roses in a formal rose garden built around a picturesque tiered fountain, many cultivars of eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) throughout the property, and a variety of orchids in the conservatory.

UNIQUE ATTRACTIONS

Apart from the themed gardens you expect to find at any public garden, WKBG has some one-of-a-kind features. The **Country Doctor's Office**, a small, circa 1890 building belonging in Bill Tyler's family, was moved from its original location 14 miles away from Owensboro and situated next to WKBG's herb garden. It now serves to educate visitors about a typical country's

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.

doctor's practice in the year 1900, including how herbs were used medicinally at the time in western Kentucky.

Sculpture is everywhere in the garden. "A Bouquet for Marjorie", the larger-than-life flower basket created by local metal artist Darin K. Evans, makes for an irresistible photo op. Elsewhere, kinetic sculptures in constant motion add whimsy. Large blocks of sandstone mined from a nearby county are scattered throughout the property, like remnants of a long-lost civilization.

The **Children's Playhouse** is a real building with a working kitchen for teaching kids how to enjoy the harvest



This gigantic metal flower basket sculpture is planted each year with different annuals.

from the vegetable garden, and it includes toys for playtime. Outside, kids can run through a holly maze or admire the colorful koi in the nearby pond.

INSPIRING SUSTAINABILITY

Nods to sustainability can be seen throughout the garden, from the windmill near the pond that shows off wind power to the rain garden that demonstrates how to slow stormwater runoff. The **Solar Smartflower**, a solar collector in the shape of a huge flower, provides supplemental electricity for the **Bill and Marilyn Young Educational Classroom**. There's also the **Green Car**, an old, vine-covered VW by one of the paths that looks like it is slowly being reclaimed by nature. "We're very concerned about environmental issues," says Tyler, "and it is included in the educational programs as an environmental statement."

EDUCATION A MISSION

Part of WKBG's mission is "to provide priceless education in order to foster an awareness of our interaction with nature." The regular "Lunch, Listen & Learn" programs take place "over the lunch period to allow those who work to come," says Tyler. In addition to garden-related topics, such as growing herbs on windowsills, says Tyler, "there has also been an emphasis on ethnic diversity and ethnic foods."

For the younger set, WKBG offers "First Saturdays for Kids" in conjunction

Additional Information

Western Kentucky Botanical Garden

25 Carter Road, Owensboro, KY 42301
(270) 993-1234
www.wkbg.org

- Hours: **March–Oct.:** Seven days a week, 9 a.m.–6 p.m. **Nov.–Feb.:** Mon.–Fri., 9 a.m.–3 p.m.
- Admission: Members: free. Adults: \$5; Seniors (65+): \$3; Students and youths: \$1.
- RAP benefits: Free admission and free or discounted entry to select special events and educational programs.

with the Daviess County Public Library. Library staff read nature-themed books to kids, then go out in the garden to experience nature firsthand.

For daylily fans, the WKBG's annual Nellie Rarick Memorial Lecture centers on techniques for hybridizing daylilies with talks and demonstrations given by nationally known hybridizers.

WKBG's **University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Experimental Garden** is a collaboration with the local Extension office. Each year, the Extension office provides the garden with plants from various commercial growers for trialing. The trial plot is planted and maintained by local Master Gardeners, who work with the local Extension agent to evaluate the plants over the season. In late summer, WKBG holds a field day for the public to view the plants and learn about their performance. Plants being trialed this year include selections of lantana, coleus, and calibrachoa.

EXPANDING THE DREAM

WKBG acquired more land recently, bringing the garden to 14 acres. Future plans include a garden for the developmentally disabled, a native plant garden, a new welcome center, and large pavilion. "The current pandemic will probably set back the plans," says Tyler, but in the meantime, the garden "is a beautiful spot with great collections of plants and great educational opportunities, so stop by and enjoy." 🌿

Mary Yee is managing editor and art director for The American Gardener.