

RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

Mercer Botanic Gardens

by Mary Yee

AS A Harris County Precinct 4 facility, Mercer Botanic Gardens in Humble, Texas, is open to the public free of charge year round. Some 250,000 visitors annually, mainly from the Houston area, enjoy its well-manicured lawns, playgrounds, ample benches, colorful seasonal display beds, and lots of paths for strolling. This makes it sound like Mercer is just another county park, but it is so much more.

With the George Bush Intercontinental Airport about four miles to the south, railroad tracks two miles to the west, and busy Aldine Westfield Road literally dividing the gardens, the sounds of human activity are ever-present. But so, too, are the songs of birds and splashing water from fountains set amid towering trees, making the garden an oasis in one of the country's most populated regions.

MODEST BEGINNINGS

Ensuring the garden is available for all to enjoy was the wish of Charles and Thelma Mercer when they sold their land to Harris County in 1974 upon their retirement. The Mercers had purchased 14.5 acres of land in pine country adjacent to Cypress Creek in 1949 and spent the next 25 years cultivating a garden there. A koi pond the Mercers created remains popular with visitors. Over the past four decades, the county has greatly expanded the garden's footprint, with its care supported by the nonprofit Mercer Society.

The 60 acres east of Aldine Westfield Road, which include the original Mercer property, feature a variety of themed gardens. On the other side of the road are over 340 acres of natural landscape—commonly referred to as the “arboretum.”

INSPIRATION AND IMAGINATION

While many of the woodies the Mercers planted, such as camellias and ginkgos, survive, the garden is vastly different than the



A variety of themed attractions to suit every taste can be found at Mercer, including the formal Renaissance Garden, top, and the ancient Mexican-inspired Tropical Garden, above.

one they left behind. “We want visitors to come out and enjoy the gardens and nature,” says Mercer Director Chris Ludwig of the park’s goal, and what better way to do it than create a little spectacle? Amid the soaring pines is a formal Renaissance Garden—complete with columns and

arbors—comprising a number of themed areas, such as the Cypress Promenade and Citrus Walk. Italian cypress, silver date palms, and other Mediterranean plants create a classical feel, as does the symmetrically laid out walkways, reflecting pools, and flower beds.



The arboretum side of Mercer features vestiges of natural landscape, such as a cypress swamp.

The Tropical Garden features a large flagstone plaza with an Olmec head statue water fountain. The Ginger Garden showcases a variety of the ornamental species. According to Ludwig, Mercer has one of the largest collections of tropicals and gingers in East Texas, and stellar examples are on view everywhere. “People can see what plants will look like full grown, so they can design their own garden oasis at home,” he says.

One of the newer displays is the Shakespeare Garden, complete with a bust of the playwright, that features plants mentioned in Shakespeare’s works. Roses and boxwood predominate, together with annuals.

The Endangered Species and Native Plant Garden features a faux beaver dam

and pond and serves as a teaching tool for habitat preservation. Among the species growing here are the Neches River rose-mallow (*Hibiscus dasycalyx*), found only in a few wetland sites in East Texas, and Florida corkwood (*Leitneria florida*), a rare shrub native to coastal Texas and Florida.

A WILD SIDE

A more back-to-nature experience awaits just across the street. Two playgrounds, a picnic area, and barbecue pavilions are situated in acres of peaceful woodland. “Mercer is on the edge of the East Piney Woods region of Texas,” says Ludwig. “Our natural landscape is made up of pines, oaks, and elms for canopy, with ironwoods and yaupon in the understory.” Much of this ecosystem is now lost, but Mercer is preserving a small part of it for future generations to enjoy.

About two-and-a-half miles of trails in the woods along Cypress Creek meander past a cypress swamp, hickory bog, and an oxbow lake, giving hikers a chance to see turtles basking on logs, frogs, birds, and other wildlife—such as snakes, for which there are signs giving fair warning.

PROGRAMS AND PLANS


Mercer holds a number of educational events throughout the year, but the ongoing pandemic has necessitated changes. “We had to convert the March Mart plant sale to online shopping and curbside pickup,” says Ludwig. The Pollinator Festival in October became a virtual event. The

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.

gardens are open, but programs have attendance restrictions.

The pandemic isn’t the only thing Mercer has had to weather. In 2017, Hurricane Harvey flooded much of the garden, killing some of the trees and shrubs. But Mercer is bouncing back. Ludwig says the gardens will be expanding an additional 43 acres, with plans for building a stormwater basin and creating more space for community events—as well as more opportunities for visitors to reconnect with nature. 

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

Additional Information

Mercer Botanic Gardens

22306 Aldine Westfield Road
Humble, TX 77338
www.hcp4.net/parks/mercer

■ Hours: Open daily. March–Oct., 8 a.m. to dusk. Nov.–Feb., 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day. Subject to change. Check website for most current information.

■ Admission: Free.

■ RAP benefits: Free or discounted educational programs. Free or discounted entry to select special events.