Green Bay Botanical Garden

by Mary Yee

Something big is happening in Green Bay, Wisconsin, this year, and it has nothing to do with football and the Packers. “The fact that the Green Bay Botanical Garden is here and thriving after 25 years is a feat in and of itself!” says Executive Director Susan Garot. “Our early struggles and perseverance have paid off, and we’re thrilled to celebrate this milestone with all in our community.” In a short time, the Green Bay Botanical Garden has become a horticultural asset for the Upper Midwest, and it’s sure to get more attention this summer with the opening of an engaging art exhibit that demonstrates recycling in a new light.

The garden opened in 1996 on several acres of a former apple orchard leased from a local technical college. On opening day, only the Visitor Center and the Mabel Thome Fountain were completed, but in the following year, several other gardens were added, including the Schleri Wellhouse & Garden and the Stumpf Belvedere (a Grecian-style gazebo). Today, the garden comprises 47 acres—about half of which has been developed into over 30 themed areas—and annually welcomes over 150,000 visitors.

Sustainability in Practice

“We’ve incorporated sustainable, earth-friendly practices into our operations for many years,” says Director of Education & Guest Experience Linda Gustke. “From gardening practices to recycling and composting programs, it is ingrained in our culture.” Living by the credo of sustainability can be tough, but the botanical garden practices what it preaches. Instead of relying on tools that use fossil fuel or electricity, the gardens are largely maintained by hand.

“Yes, indeed, the hand watering and weeding are time intensive,” admits Director of Horticulture Mark Konlock, explaining that volunteers do the weeding and other maintenance, while the horticulture team handles watering. “With hand watering, we can give each plant the right amount of water at the correct time,” says Konlock, “and we can tailor our operations around the weather. We also have rain gauges on all our automatic watering systems—mostly for turf areas.” Grassy areas that are infrequently used are being replaced with no-mow vegetation.

The best place to see the principles of sustainability in action is in the Donald J. Schneider Family Grand Garden. “It’s planted with more than 10,000 perennials that are native to Wisconsin, are natives, or that we have noted attract insects throughout the years,” says Konlock. “There are also infiltration basins for stormwater retention and groundwater recharge.” Interpretive signs help visitors understand the importance of native plants to home landscapes and the vital role plants play in storm water control.

Art for Thought

Like many public gardens, Green Bay’s local garden seeks to offer a variety of experiences. Opening at the garden this summer is “Washed Ashore: Art to Save the Sea,” an art installation that fits right in with the botanical garden’s sustainability message. This...
show featuring spectacular sculptures of animals created from debris and trash has been viewed in other cities in the past few years, but its run in Green Bay will be special. “To connect ‘Washed Ashore’ to our region, we commissioned the creation of a brand new art piece—Stanley the Sturgeon,” says Gustke. “Stanley will help us highlight the issue of plastic pollution right here in the Great Lakes.” Visitors will be able to find Stanley and friends on display throughout the garden from May 8 through September 26.

**FOR FUTURE STEWARDS**

Young visitors will naturally gravitate towards the half-acre Gertrude B. Nielsen Children’s Garden to explore the tree house, zip down a slide, or navigate a vine maze. This popular garden is scheduled for an upgrade in 2022. “The expansion will add features totaling about 2.5 acres,” says Garot. “Some of those features, such as treehouses, will tell stories of trees; a splash pad will offer lessons on the Northern Lakes food chain; and a wetland deck will focus on runoff, among others.” The enlarged garden is expected to open in 2023.

**COLD-CLIMATE PLANT INSPIRATION**

Of course, gardeners who live in the Upper Midwest will take away a lot of ideas when they visit the botanical garden. “We focus on plants that can be grown in the USDA Hardiness Zone 4/5 border area,” says Konlock. Among these are collections of conifers, roses, and hostas.

Of note is the Plant Collections Network-accredited collection of magnolias—thanks largely to the late Dennis Ledvina, a garden volunteer and renowned magnolia breeder who developed many popular hardy selections. “Dennis donated the vast majority of the plants that are in the collection,” says Konlock. Among the 169 specimens are Ledvina hybrids such as *Magnolia ‘Rose Marie’* and *‘Red Baron’*. Most of the magnolias reach peak bloom in mid-May, about the same time as over 300,000 spring bulbs planted throughout the garden.

While there is reflection this year at the Green Bay Botanical Garden on how far it’s come—to be capped with a community celebration in the fall—its leadership is already looking ahead. “We’re on our journey to make the Garden inclusive, diverse, equitable, and accessible,” says Garot. “We want to ensure we include everyone in our community in planning for and delivering on our programming.” Lofty goals for the next 25 years.

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