

RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

The Dawes Arboretum

by Mary Yee

GIANT BIRDS at the Dawes Arboretum are sure to draw visitors this summer. “Avian Avatars,” a specially commissioned art installation scheduled to go on view May 27 through March 2023, features bird sculptures—some more than 20 feet tall—made from bamboo and other material. Among the birds are a sandhill crane, eastern bluebird, and great horned owl, all with narratives connecting them to the arboretum’s history. “These sculptures are the first of their kind on our grounds, and we’re excited for guests to see them among our beautiful landscapes,” says Executive Director Luke Messinger.

Messinger is hopeful that visitors will get something more than Instagram shots from the experience. Educational programs, such as an introduction to birdwatching and creating bird habitat, will support the art exhibit. On a broader scale, visitors to the nearly 2,000-acre property in Newark, Ohio, east of Columbus will see that nature is a great landscaper, and trees are an important part of the picture.

Founded in 1929 by tree lovers Beman and Bertie Dawes, the Dawes Arboretum is first and foremost an arboretum—a collection of trees and shrubs for research, conservation, and display, says Messinger. As a Level IV accredited arboretum, one of its most important missions is to serve as a “repository of tree genes,” including those “for species native to the Ohio River Valley.” The Dawes Arboretum is part of the nationwide Plant Collection Network and has recognized collections of buckeyes (*Aesculus* spp.), horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), maples (*Acer* spp.), and dawn red (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*). Genetic material from the arboretum’s tree collections are shared with other arboreta “to develop better plants for gardens, landscaping, and ecological restoration projects,” says Messinger.



Above: Azalea Glen is bright with bloom in spring. Left: This owl is among several bamboo sculptures created by The Myth Makers that will be on display at the Dawes Arboretum’s “Avian Avatars” installation.

INSPIRED BY NATURE

Most visitors aren’t plant breeders or researchers, so what they’ll see is a place of great natural beauty. Messinger says, “People have told me that coming here during the pandemic really helped them, so we’re not just a nerdy scientific place.”

With 14 miles of trails for strolling and hiking and encompassing a variety of habitats, including wetlands, forests, and prairie, the Dawes Arboretum is an outdoor enthu-

sia’s haven. A 4.5 mile driving tour is also available.

Much of the arboretum’s landscape comprises woodlands and large collections of trees—among them, ones of hollies (*Ilex* spp.), conifers, maples, witch hazels (*Hamamelis* spp.), azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.), and magnolias. Azalea Glen is hard to miss when the shrubs bloom in spring. “Some of the collections intermingle because the trees share preferred growing conditions, so they almost look landscaped,” says Messinger.

Because the arboretum sits on former farmland, returning it to nature has been an ongoing effort. The 70-acre Dutch Fork Wetlands, for example, was a former agricultural field that the Dawes Arboretum purchased in 2005. In figuring out what to do with it, Messinger says,

“The land kind of tells you what it wants to be.” The geography in eastern Ohio is characterized by bottomlands created by glaciers, so it made sense to restore the parcel to a wetland ecosystem. Today, visitors can stroll on a boardwalk to catch a glimpse of wildlife such as Jefferson and spotted salamanders in late winter and spring and get up close to a variety of wetland plants. This restored ecosystem also highlights the ecological importance of the Ohio River watershed.

The Red Barn Reserve is another tract with a wetland pond, boardwalk, and woodlands. A picturesque red barn recalls the land’s agrarian past.

Along the Bur Oak Trail is a section of restored grassland that pays homage to the prairie ecosystem that once dominated the Midwest. Begun in 2019, this habitat is in its very early stage of establishment.

The Cypress Swamp is a visitor favorite. Most often associated with the southeastern United States, this habitat was planted in 1927 and has survived nearly a century, showing the adaptability of cypress trees to a northern climate.

The rugged section called Arboretum East features woodlands and a gorge overlook. At the southeastern edge is a surviving example of an earthwork burial mound belonging to an indigenous people of the Hopewell culture who lived in what is now Ohio thousands of years ago.

There are several high points that offer prime viewing opportunities. Glacier Ridge on Oak Hill off Lake Trail affords a spectacular perspective of the

Additional Information

The Dawes Arboretum

7770 Jacksontown Road
Newark, OH 43056
(740) 323-2355
<https://dawesarb.org>

- Hours: March–October 9 a.m.–7 p.m.; November–February 9–5
- Admission: Adults \$10; children 5–15 \$5; children under 5 free.
- RAP benefits Free admission (90-mile exclusion enforced)

glacier-carved valley below. A 36-foot-tall Observation Tower in another part of the arboretum provides a look at the eight-acre Dawes Lake and a 2,040-foot-long arbovitae topiary hedge that spells out the arboretum’s name.

GARDENER’S GARDENS

People looking for more cultivated “gardens” will find them here and there. Designed in the early 1960s by landscape architect Makoto Nakamura, the Japanese Garden covers 17 acres and includes a pond with koi, footbridge, and shelter house. Messinger says, “It’s one of our most popular areas.”

The gardens around the circa 1867 Daweswood House Museum History Center, the former Dawes family home, are designed with heirloom plants from the 1930s. The house itself, filled with family memorabilia, is open for guided tours in the summer and fall.

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 345 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.
- 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.



The Cypress Swamp is one of the most northernmost examples of the ecosystem.

The All Seasons Garden close to the Visitors Center features beds of coneflowers, rudbeckias, dahlias, sunflowers, and other flowering plants. Ohio native eastern prickly-pear can be found growing in the newly constructed crevice and rock garden nearby. Herbs and a variety of ornamental perennials and shrubs are integrated in the Learning Garden.

So while giant bird sculptures will be an irresistible draw to the Dawes Arboretum this summer, those who can should come back often. Says Messinger, “It’s truly a place of beauty all year long.”

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