

## RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

# Blithewold Mansion, Gardens and Arboretum

by Mary Yee

**L**IKE MANY of the late-19th- and early-20th-century estates in nearby Newport, what is now Blithewold Mansion, Gardens and Arboretum in Bristol, Rhode Island, was a summer home for the well-to-do—in this case, Augustus and Bessie Van Wickle, who made a fortune in the coal industry. But unlike the Breakers and those other estates known primarily for their over-the-top mansions, Blithewold is very much a group of gardens with a mansion.



An English Country aesthetic is evident in the building and the 33-acre estate, which remained a family home for two generations until the death of the Van Wickles' daughter, Marjorie Lyon, in 1976 at age 93. Ownership then passed on to what is now Preserve Rhode Island. Since becoming a public garden in 1978, Blithewold has prided itself as being "one of the most fully developed and authentic examples of the Country Place Era."

### PAST MEETS PRESENT

Blithewold opens each year in April with its week-long Daffodil Days event, when over 50,000 of the blooms signal the arrival of spring. The mansion closes in October "but the gardens are still so lovely in the fall that we remain open to visitors for strolling through the end of the year," says Tree Callanan, director of communications and visitor experience. The mansion reopens briefly in winter for its popular

"Christmas at Blithewold" celebration, when the mansion and grounds are decorated and illuminated for holiday visitors.

"The gardens have gone through many iterations over time," says Betsy Ekholm, horticulturist, gardens and greenhouse manager at Blithewold. "The plantings are a reflection of both the Arts and Crafts movement—the time period when the original gardens were created—

with daffodils in spring before the trees leaf out. Ekholm says the garden in summer is "quite cool and lush, and in autumn the foliage glows overhead."

Dating to about 1900, the informal Rose Garden combines roses with cottage-garden favorites such as clematis, foxgloves, dahlias, and peonies, creating a fabulous mixture of colors and textures in summer. Many of the roses are newer varieties such as the David



Blithewold's 45-room mansion, left, was a summer home for two generations of the Van Wickle family. Above: Roses and a variety of perennials flourish around the moon gate in the Rose Garden.

and of current needs for a constant flow of color and interest. We make an effort to blend the old and the new."

Bessie Van Wickle (later McKee, after her first husband's death) was an avid gardener. It was she who named the estate Blithewold—Old English for "happy woodland"—upon acquiring it in 1894 and worked with landscape architect John DeWolf in developing many of the gardens. One of the earliest ones is the Bosquet, a woodland space accented with a fountain that is awash

Austin roses, but Ekholm says, "We've made an effort in recent years to return historic plants to the gardens. We have a list of roses we know the family grew, and we've been able to source some of these and replant them." A stone moon gate serves as a focal point for the rose garden.

In contrast, the North Garden, which can be accessed from the back of the mansion, is much more formal, featuring ornamental borders, stonework, a garden pool, the 10-acre Great Lawn, and a spectacular view of Narragansett Bay.



A popular space for weddings, the North Garden looks out to the Great Lawn and Narragansett Bay.

The Asian-influenced Water Garden, which dates to the early 1900s, is the epitome of tranquility with its waterlily-filled pond, an arched stone bridge, and Japanese maples. An iron lantern on a small island in the pond creates a charming vignette.

Ekholm says visitors enjoy the restored Lord and Burnham Greenhouses. McKee had them installed in 1901, and then, as now, they house orchids, citrus, camellias, and other tender plants. In winter, the horticulture staff also uses the greenhouses for propagating plants for the next season.

Near the greenhouses are the newer Idea Gardens, a collection of spaces including an

herb garden that offer inspiration for home gardeners. “We use this area more freely to experiment with plantings and different color palettes,” says Ekholm. The Pollinator Garden, she adds, “is another nod to newer trends.” Here, native plants such as coneflowers (*Echinacea* spp.), Joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium purpureum*), and goldenrod (*Solidago* spp.) are grown to attract native bees, butterflies, and other insects.

### NOTABLE TREES

As an accredited arboretum, Blithewold is home to 2,000 tree specimens representing 500 species, including many plant-

## Blithewold Mansion, Gardens and Arboretum

101 Ferry Road (Rt. 114)  
Bristol, RI 02809  
(401) 253-2707  
[www.blithewold.org](http://www.blithewold.org)

- Hours: Gardens open April–December. Mansion open April–October. Hours vary. Check the website for the most current information.
- Admission: General (house and gardens): adult, \$18; child \$8. Gardens only: adult, \$14; child, \$6.
- RAP benefits: Free admission and free parking.

ed in the mid-19th century by the owner previous to the Van Wickles. McKee and Lyon added many more over the years, creating a stellar collection. Blithewold’s Chinese toon trees (*Toona sinensis*) “were one of the reasons we first made a connection with the Arnold Arboretum in 1926,” says Ekholm. In August that year, plant explorer E.H. Wilson and botanist Alfred Rehder arrived from Boston to view the trees and marveled at everything they saw. McKee wrote to one of her daughters afterward that both men “kept saying, ‘Why you have a second arboretum here; we never dreamed there was a place like this.’”

On the East Lawn are many exceptional specimens that were planted as gifts to Lyon, including a dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) that was presented to her by the Arnold Arboretum in 1971. There is also a giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) planted in her honor about 1930 and a dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*) planted in 1973 on her 90th birthday.

A giant sequoia planted in 1911 in the Enclosed Garden is the tallest of its species east of the Mississippi. Also of note are two Rhode Island Champion Trees: a Sargent’s weeping hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis* ‘Sargentii’) and a silver fir (*Abies alba*).

From a home for the privileged to a garden for all, Blithewold has continued to be a place where trees, plants, and nature are celebrated and enjoyed. Says Ekholm, “Our aim is to bring beauty and inspiration to each person who visits.”

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

## 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](http://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.