

## RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

### Cheyenne Botanic Gardens

by Mary Yee

**I**N WYOMING, where nature reigns supreme, magnificent National Parks can be found at every turn, yet there's only one established public botanical garden—Cheyenne Botanic Gardens. Its singular status can be attributed to the High Plains state's sparse population and the region's harsh environment, which can make gardening a real challenge. Yet even where hail and heavy winds are norms in the weather forecast, growing a garden is a worthwhile pursuit in so many ways.

#### PEOPLE FIRST

"Sustainability" and "giving back to the community" are buzz words in many of today's conversations, but they have been in practice at Cheyenne Botanic Gardens since its beginning in 1977. According to Shane Smith, the garden's founder and director emeritus, Cheyenne Botanic Gardens is unlike most public gardens because it "began as a social service project providing food, therapy, and meaningful activity mainly for senior citizen volunteers." At that time, the garden was in a different location than it is today. The project soon expanded to serve at-risk youth and the physically disabled. At its core was a solar greenhouse—"the first large-size, 100 percent passively solar-heated greenhouse in the nation," Smith proudly notes.

#### Cheyenne Botanic Gardens

710 S. Lions Park Drive  
Cheyenne, WY 82001  
(307) 637-6458 [www.botanic.org](http://www.botanic.org)

■ Hours: Conservatory and Paul Smith Children's Village Sept.–May, Tues.–Sat. 10 a.m.–5 p.m. June–Aug., Tues.–Sat.– 10 a.m.–5 p.m., Sun. 12–5 p.m.  
Grounds open year-round dawn to dusk.  
■ Admission: Free.



Located outside of the Shane Smith Grand Conservatory, this new crevice garden designed by Kenton Seth blooms from March to November and is resistant to hail and drought.

Smith, a Colorado native who spent over 40 years at the garden before retiring as its longtime director in 2018, says he quickly realized that "Cheyenne likely has the worst garden climate in the Lower 48." He recalls, "There were many times I almost threw in the towel, but I stayed positive that we could make a difference even with the extreme climate." He owes the garden's success in large part to "a great staff who brought much passion to our mission."

For his trailblazing efforts, Smith has been honored by having the garden's Grand Conservatory—which he helped build—named for him in 2019. He is also the recipient of the American Horticultural Society's 2012 Great American Gardeners Professional Award.

#### TELLING MANY STORIES

Today, Cheyenne Botanic Gardens is a

nine-acre showpiece for the city of Cheyenne, which manages it as part of its City Parks and Recreation Department. Themed areas include a perennial walk, rose garden, cottage garden, herb garden, a labyrinth, a lily pond, and a lake. There are also two community gardens with plots for rent.

Cheyenne Botanic Gardens still has a vital volunteer program billed as "horticultural therapy in action." As an example of sustainability, a significant percentage of the garden's electricity is supplied by a photovoltaic solar energy system.

Fittingly, the Shane Smith Grand Conservatory is one of the most popular attractions for visitors. The three-story building, which houses collections of plants from all over the world, provide a reprieve from inclement weather, especially in winter. Cacti, orchids, bananas, ferns, bromeliads, and even a gigantic palm tree grow happily

## ABOUT THE RECIPROCAL ADMISSIONS PROGRAM (RAP)

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! 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).



**The Paul Smith Children's Village was the world's first Platinum LEED-certified children's garden.**

ly protected from the elements. There's an indoor stream and waterfall to provide the ambiance of a tropical forest as well as an orangerie and a bonsai collection.

The Paul Smith Children's Village—no relation to Shane Smith—is the world's first Platinum LEED-certified children's garden for sustainability. The windmill located here is not a quaint piece of decor—it actually pumps water from a well to service the garden's water features. A wind turbine supplies the garden with much of its electricity. A wetlands area, a sheepherder's wagon, secret garden, peek-a-boo path, and other points of interest keep kids engaged.

Even here, there are lessons to learn. "Last year we grew produce from May through mid-October, including inside the Children's Village, to donate to the needy," says Director Tina Worthman. "It was truly a year of growing tomatoes and peppers thanks to the hot summer and long fall."

### BEAUTIFUL AND TOUGH

While tender species lead pampered lives in the conservatory, plants outdoors have to stand on their own.

During the short growing season, tulips and daffodils brighten late spring, followed in summer by bedding plants such as zinnias, cosmos, and lots of petunias. Petunias,

Smith says, "are among the most resilient annuals," being able to withstand damage from wind and hail. Perennials such as yarrows, columbines, coneflowers, lupines, and penstemons also provide summer color. "We're listed as USDA Zone 5b," says Horticulturist Jessica Friis, "but since we often have late and early frosts, we advise people to stick to plants hardy to Zone 4 or lower."

The Bedont Rose Garden highlights non-grafted, hardy varieties suited for Wyoming's climate. "The toughest rose we know of is 'Harrison's Yellow,'" says Friis. "It came west with the pioneers and has survived on its own on abandoned homesteads—but it only blooms once in June." For those looking for a more sustained floral display and willing to provide extra irrigation and care, she recommends 'Nearly Wild', 'Thérèse Bugnet', 'Champlain', 'Bonica', and 'Belle Poitevine'.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

At Cheyenne Botanic Gardens, it always comes back to people. Worthman is hoping to continue connecting with more gardeners in the community. Plans are underway to renovate the South Community Garden "to extend our growing capacity next year with more raised beds," she says. A greenhouse will be added this winter. The space will also become an urban agriculture demonstration center to educate the public.

Rooted in bringing people from diverse backgrounds and needs together through horticulture, Cheyenne Botanic Gardens is, says Shane Smith, a "social experiment that has been amazingly successful."



**Tropical plants around a waterfall provide year-round color in the conservatory.**

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