

GARDEN DESTINATIONS

Vermont Champlain Valley Landscapes Owe Their Beauty to Cold Hardiness

by Cheryl Dorschner

“Leaf Peepers” are what Vermonters call tourists in cars with not-green license plates who queue tightly on winding mountain back roads every autumn, their eyes eagerly sweeping the line where blue sky meets the crimson, copper, and golden treetops of the forest. Garden lovers, however, know to look below the trees to appreciate irresistible village and country landscapes where frost felled all but rose-tinged hydrangeas, asters, goldenrod, and mums—and switched on the bright leaves of fothergillas, viburnums, and blueberries.

Vermont is small in size and population (45th and 49th in the country), and short on growing season (three to four frost-free months), so gardening successfully can be a real challenge. The upside of intense winters is that Vermonters can grow to perfection what gardeners in many other regions cannot: plants that need winter chill, snow cover, and dormancy to perform their best, such as spring bulbs, lilacs, lupines, irises, and peonies.

Visitors aiming to see the most gardens over the fewest miles do well to stay near Vermont’s largest city, Burlington, along Lake Champlain. The five gardens profiled here are at their most glorious in May and June, but they’re also worthy in fall.

MUST SEE IN SHELBURNE

Two big tourist attractions in Shelburne, located minutes apart, have roots in the late 19th century, when railroad financiers lavishly built and landscaped country estates. **Shelburne Farms** was a summer home and experimental farm of William Seward Webb and Lila Vanderbilt Webb. Their daughter-in-law, Electra Havemeyer Webb, a passionate collector of Americana, founded **Shelburne Museum**. Both sites have become renowned non-profit educational institutions that preserved this early history as a bridge to their 21st century thinking



Hundreds of peonies bloom *en masse* along brick-walled formal gardens near the restaurant and Inn at Shelburne Farms.

on culture, place, land use, and sustainable practices.

Shelburne Farms’ formal gardens on tiered slopes between the Webbs’ former home and Lake Champlain were an extraordinary sight during its heyday from the 1880s to 1936. Initially a small part of Fredrick Law Olmsted’s master plan for the 1,400-acre property, the gardens have been redesigned frequently over time.

Today, visitors will see a restored reinterpretation of the 1909–1915 Italianate gardens. Traditional facing formal beds are filled with that era’s English cottage-garden perennials. French lilacs, peonies *en masse* along walls, and brilliant sunsets behind the Adirondacks steal the show in June. <https://shelburnefarms.org>.

Shelburne Museum contains a mind-boggling 100,000-plus works of American art and decorative items—from decoys to dolls and carriages—packed into 39

historic buildings and a steamship on 45 acres. Twenty themed gardens dot the visitors’ map for self-guided tours. Over 400 lilacs bloom in spring. In midsummer, thousands of daylilies take their turn. <https://shelburnemuseum.org/gardens-and-landscape>.

A GEM IN HINESBURG

Lincoln Hill Botanical Garden in Hinesburg arose from the obsessions of another collector. Here, over 40 years of personal plant accumulation plus trees grown for his landscape and stone masonry business come together in Paul Wiczoreck’s gardens and rare plant nursery, where specimens are carefully arranged and tended. These two acres of gardens plus another acre in-ground tree nursery evolved to what Wiczoreck’s wife, Mary Crane, calls the “Unintended Arboretum.”



Connoisseurs of unusual plants seek out the private Lincoln Hill Botanical Garden.

Wieczorek says, “Our garden is not manicured. You will find some weeds, dead branches, and an occasional dead tree or two—in respect to the other creatures that call our garden home.”

There’s a rock garden and numerous alpine plants, herbaceous perennials, shrubs, and trees. More than 150 rhododendron species and cultivars take turns blooming April through August. The garden is open for specific events and by appointment. www.lincolnhillbotanicalgardens.com.

COEXISTING WITH NATURE

“If Lincoln Hill is the Unintended Arboretum, **Farm Craft VT** is the

Un-Garden,” says Becca Lindenmeyr of the purposeful yet renegade dooryard plantings, fields of sunflower, lavender, and flowering herbs surrounding her home and business in Shelburne that segue into wild habitat. She and her husband, Tim, only intensively plant around their net-zero home and tend crops, a small apiary, and a trio of sheep that provide raw materials for their “seed to soap” business.

An ecological landscaper, Lindenmeyr says the Un-Garden “is a more radical experiment of running the edge between wild and cultivated. How much biodiversity can we reintroduce

NEARBY NURSERIES

Chittenden County is lush with nurseries, many family or individually owned, that are worth visiting for garden inspiration.

Arcana Gardens & Greenhouses, Jericho. www.arcanagardens.com.

Claussen’s Florist, Greenhouses & Perennial Farm, Colchester. www.claussens.com.

Gardener’s Supply Company, Burlington and Williston. www.gardeners.com/our-garden-centers.

Horsford Gardens & Nursery, Charlotte. <https://horsfordnursery.com/welcome-to-horsfords>.

Paquette Full of Posies, Williston. www.vermontnursery.com/plant-nursery.

Red Wagon Plants, Hinesburg. www.redwagonplants.com.

and allow to proliferate and then just maintain the edges?”

Tours and tea are offered May through September. Onsite facilities are available for those who want to stay over. www.farmcraftvt.com.

A NURSERY THAT INSPIRES

Located in Essex Junction, **Full Circle Gardens** is one of a few Vermont nurseries to still maintain display gardens. The focus here is on regional natives and perennials proven to support pollinators.

“Our five gardens help people see how the plants we sell will perform in their gardens,” says owner Sarah Salatino. “They see combinations that work and what unfamiliar plants look like in bloom.” Salatino often finds herself teaching customers on the spot.

That’s why Full Circle Gardens earned the Vermont Nursery and Landscape Association 2022 Retailer of the Year Award. <https://fullcirclegardens.com>.

Spring, summer, or fall, Vermont offers a wealth of horticultural adventures. ■

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Farm Craft VT grows its own ingredients used in the production of its homemade personal care and cleaning products.

TOP: CHERYL DORSCHNER. BOTTOM: COURTESY OF FARM CRAFT VT