

GARDEN DESTINATIONS

Gardening in Birmingham, Alabama

by Linda Askey



A visitor favorite year round, the Japanese Garden at Birmingham Botanical Gardens is especially enchanting in spring.

Birmingham, Alabama, is a gardening town, with a pervasive green aesthetic that began in the 1920s with the Olmsted Brothers plan for the city's parks—and a place I'm happy to call home.

Built on the ridges and valleys of the southern Appalachians, the land is naturally clothed with a canopy dominated by oaks and hickories. We have a diverse terrain that includes lichen-splattered boulder outcrops and rocky soil that bedevils the spade. The season is long—from mid-March to mid-November. Summers are hot, with humidity that our local weather forecaster calls “air you can wear.” But we have real winters that freeze plants into dormancy. Trop-

ical plants will not survive, although a few gingers, bananas, cannas, and such are root hardy and are considered perennials.

On this canvas, the gardens of Birmingham are planted with a framework of broadleaf evergreens (*Ilex* sp., *Illicium* sp., *Camellia* sp., *Osmanthus* sp., and more), along with the occasional heat-tolerant conifers or cold-hardy palms. While beautiful plants from other parts of the world grow exceptionally well here, the late Louise “Weesie” Smith, a Birmingham native and renowned gardener, recognized the richness of our native flora and did much to open our eyes to the wild plants and

ecosystems of the Southeast. An appreciation for both can be seen in many of the public gardens in the city.

IN AND AROUND BIRMINGHAM

The late Eddie Aldridge, known locally for his former garden center and nationally for his introduction of the double ‘Snowflake’ oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) in the early 1970s, continues to have impact today. His former homeplace is now **Aldridge Gardens** in the contiguous city of Hoover, Alabama. With well-placed art and thoughtful plantings, it offers a place of respite for visitors amid a busy suburban area. aldrigedgardens.com



Left: A 30-acre public garden, Aldridge Gardens features a variety of ecosystems and collections, including an Alabama meadow, a lake, a remnant pine and oak forest, and displays of hydrangeas, native azaleas, and camellias. Above: The falls at Turkey Creek Nature Preserve in autumn.

Birmingham Botanical Gardens (BBG) offers 67 planted acres, themed gardens, and innovative programs. BBG Executive Director Tom Underwood observes, “Gardening can be solitary, but it is inherently social.” BBG is that inclusive horticultural hub for the community of gardeners and those who want to learn to garden. Endowed lectures, a year-round educational program, restaurant, and gift shop make it a gathering spot for plant enthusiasts. Weesie Smith played a role in developing **The Kaul Wildflower Garden**, now a showcase of more than 200 Alabama natives. Garden art is displayed outside of the garden-themed

lending library. If you have a problem in your garden needing diagnosis, the Alabama Extension Service operates the C. Beaty Hanna Horticulture & Environmental Center at the gardens. Don’t miss this year’s spring plant sale April 11–13. www.bbgardens.org

On the east side of Birmingham lies a spectacular site surrounded by dense development and busy traffic. A onetime limestone quarry and mining site that nature reclaimed and community activism preserved, **Ruffner Mountain’s** natural garden encompasses over 1,000 acres. For information on walking the trails, taking workshops at the nature center, or

attending events such as the native plant sale, go to ruffnermountain.org.

Speaking of nature’s garden, **Turkey Creek Nature Preserve** (TCNP) in nearby Pinson, Alabama, provides a view into the Alabama that once was, and fortunately at TCNP, still is. It is less garden and more nature at its best, but what gardener doesn’t love that! turkeycreeknp.com

A SHORT DRIVE AWAY

About an hour east in Anniston, Alabama, lies the **Longleaf Botanical Gardens**, named for the mountain longleaf pines in the area. Situated adjacent to and around the city’s natural history and art museums, Longleaf is the place for those with zone envy, longing to bring palms and other tropical plants as far north as possible. Nature trails, xeric gardens, and even aquatic plants are also featured. Director Hayes Jackson is a plantsman *extraordinaire*. The garden holds monthly plant sales, as well as a big sale on April 27 this year. exploreamag.org

An hour’s drive south takes you to **Petals from the Past**, a mom-and-pop garden center not to be missed. This multi-generational oasis retails hard-to-find selections of herbs, roses, tomatoes, succulents, shrubs, native plants, and a keen selection of fruit for home gardeners. petalsfromthepast.com ■



The tropical cascade garden at the Longleaf Botanical Gardens showcases hardy tropical perennials and hardy ornamental bananas for central Alabama.

Linda Askey is a freelance writer based in Birmingham, Alabama. She was a longtime garden editor for Southern Living and has written for many major publications.