

GARDEN DESTINATIONS

Madison, Wisconsin

by Connie Cottingham

Marked by cold winters and long summer days, Madison, Wisconsin, is an urban outdoor lover's dream with five lakes, 270 parks, and over 200 miles of biking and hiking trails. It is one of only five Platinum-Level Bike-Friendly Communities in the country. With Aldo Leopold, Frank Lloyd Wright, and the first Earth Day closely tied to Madison's history, it is no surprise that conservation, education, and native habitats are keystones of the area's gardens.

DOWNTOWN

Downtown Madison is on an isthmus between Lake Mendota and Lake Monona. Staying in a downtown hotel allows many options within walking distance. Madison celebrates late sunsets and warm weather with an abundance of outdoor summer concerts, including the bi-weekly free Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra Concerts on the State Capitol grounds. The gold statue-adorned,



The dome of the State Capitol lights up the night sky in downtown Madison.

domed **State Capitol** reigns as the center of downtown, surrounded by restaurants, shops, and museums. A pedestrian plaza to the southeast connects with the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed convention center on Lake Monona. State Street Pedestrian Mall to the west, lined with historic architecture, links downtown to the University of Wisconsin campus.



Native plants soften the hardscape at Monona Terrace's William T. Evjue Rooftop Gardens, which offers a great view of Lake Monona.

A must is a tour of **Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center** (mononaterrace.com), built almost 60 years after Frank Lloyd Wright developed his first design for the center in 1938. The **William T. Evjue Rooftop Gardens** offers views of downtown, Lake Monona and the State Capitol. Redbuds and native prairie plants and other perennials that can brave the sunny, windy, 68,000-square-foot concrete plaza are complemented by modern sculptures on display. Wright's light spires on the plaza were inspired by hollyhocks. Ginkgos, one of Wright's favorite trees, are planted throughout the 4.4-acre campus and their distinctive leaf form is used as a motif inside the building.

Period Garden Park (periodgarden-park.org) in the Mansion Hill District was started almost 50 years ago when citizens bought the quarter acre to save it from development. Dedicated volunteers tend this charming, quiet, pictur-

esque garden. It is a perfect spot to play with a camera and sketchpad or listen to the fountains and birds from a bench.

For a guided experience of the city's neighborhoods, I highly recommend the **Historic Architecture Walking Tours** (madisonpreservation.org), which run May through September and offers a variety of destinations.

The **Dane County Farmers' Market** (dcfm.org) on the shaded sidewalks around the Capitol building is America's largest producers-only farmers' market. Come early on Saturday mornings from April through November for the best selection of produce, cheeses, baked goods, flowers, and more. Later, stores and museums open, and live music and crowds energize the market.

WEST AND SOUTH MADISON
Allen Centennial Garden (allencentennialgarden.org) is on the University



The dwarf conifer garden and pond at Allen Centennial Garden

of Wisconsin campus, west of downtown. Open free to the public dawn to dusk, this small display and teaching garden surrounds the 1896 home that housed the College of Agriculture's first four deans. There are 14 different garden spaces, including a dwarf conifer collection, secluded woodland garden, pond, formal garden, and cottage garden. As you leave, ask anyone on the sidewalk for directions to **The Babcock Hall Dairy Store**, located on campus and run by the school's agriculture department. Trust the University of Wisconsin, which has the oldest dairy

program in the country, to know how to create amazing ice cream.

A mile south of downtown and campus is the 1,260-acre **University of Wisconsin–Madison Arboretum** (arboretum.wisc.edu). It is a beloved green space, a living laboratory, and a National Historic Landmark. Aldo Leopold was the research director when the arboretum was dedicated in 1934. UW Arboretum contains the world's oldest restored prairie (from farmland), other restored ecosystems, a visitor center with a native plant garden, and the **Longenecker Horticultural Gardens**, with the largest

and most diverse collection of trees and shrubs in Wisconsin. Joining a tour would enrich your experience.

J.W. Jung Seed Company started sending seed catalogs from Wisconsin in 1909. One of the six **Jung Garden Centers** (junggardencenters.com) is in Fitchburg, four miles southwest of the Arboretum. It is an impressive garden center, but what makes it special is the long wall of well-labeled and organized vegetable, annual, perennial, and organic seeds (stocked fall through spring.)

Within 30 minutes south of downtown Madison are three well-loved, locally-owned garden centers to explore for a fun shopping break: **Kopke's Greenhouse** (kopkesgreenhouse.com), **Fitchburg Farms** (fitchburgfarms.com), and **K&A Greenhouse** (kandagreenhouse.com). Each has its own specialties and personalities.

EAST OF DOWNTOWN

Family owned since 1913, **Kleins Floral and Greenhouses** (kleinsfloral.com) is a florist and garden center with a 30,000-square-foot greenhouse. Since it opens early, you can spend time there before heading to **Olbrich Botanical Gardens**.

The **Tower Garden** is one of my favorite spaces there, changing from intimate to expansive in a few steps and offering a new discovery and view at every turn. The **Birch Walk** and the **Kaleidoscope** are mesmerizing.

A few blocks away is the **Lansing Food Forest** (www.wisconsinfoodforests.com/lansing-food-forest), an edibles demonstration garden where everyone is welcome to pick, learn about food plants, or relax on a bench.

Aldo Leopold Nature Center (aldoleopoldnaturecenter.org) encourages children to love nature through hands-on learning experiences. Look over the prairie from the Center's deck or walk the mown paths to the pond to be closer to the plants, birds and wildlife. Whether at this nature center or the Wisconsin–Madison Arboretum, learning about and standing in a prairie is an important part of understanding the Madison landscape. ■



Olbrich Botanical Gardens includes a gravel garden at the entrance, plus this one near the Great Lawn.

You can find Arkansas-based garden and travel writer Connie Cottingham at gardentravelexperiences.com.