

# GARDEN GRANDEUR

*The Mid-Atlantic States bloom with noted public botanical gardens that are at their most spectacular this time of year.*

By Theresa Gawlas Medoff



COURTESY OF LADEW TOPIARY GARDENS

**I**t's an embarrassment of riches, but one for which we are most grateful. Here in the Mid-Atlantic States, botanical gardens exist in such profusion that a nature lover could visit a different garden every week spring through fall and still not have sampled them all. There are so many gardens in the Philadelphia area alone—more than 30 public gardens, arboreta and historic landscapes within 30 miles of the city—that a consortium of those gardens has taken to calling the region “America’s Garden Capital.”

Of course, public gardens grow in abundance beyond that region, too. They vary from the government-established U.S. Botanical Garden on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., to the many former estates gifted to the public as botanical gardens, to community-developed gardens such as the work-in-progress West Virginia Botanic Garden.

We’ve highlighted a few of our favorite Mid-Atlantic botanical gardens in these pages, and you’ll find even more online—along with a slideshow and video—in an extended version of this article at [AAA.com/world](http://AAA.com/world).



A ginkgo tree planted in 1785 in Bartram's Garden

Bartram's Garden

## BARTRAM'S GARDEN

His name might not be as familiar to the average American as those of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, but among horticulturalists in this country, John Bartram is *the* founding father—in his case, of American botany. It was Bartram (1699–1777), a farmer's son and third-generation Pennsylvania Quaker, who in 1728 established the first botanical garden in North America and populated it using seeds and plant specimens gathered on his travels throughout the Eastern U.S.—from Florida north to Lake Ontario and west to the Ohio River.

That original 18th-century garden still blooms today in the form of Bartram's Garden, a 45-acre public park and National Historic Landmark along the Schuylkill River in southwest Philadelphia. The park comprises Bartram's 1731 home and historic farm outbuildings as well as a 14-acre naturalistic botanic garden of North American plants, including several trees planted in the 1700s, and a new quarter-acre formal botanic garden based on the 19th-century exotic garden of Bartram's granddaughter Ann Bartram Carr.

Back in the early 1700s, establishing a botanical garden “was a really new idea,” says Aseel Rasheed, Welcome Center manager at Bartram's Garden. “It was something completely different that no one else was doing, and it came from [John Bartram's] own personal passion for plants. That passion was probably nurtured by his family. . . . Quakers have this belief that if you want to see the hand of God, you look to nature to find it.”

Bartram's botanic garden was the locus of an international plant trade in which he sold seeds, primarily for shrubs and trees, to people all over the world. His clients included scientists and hobbyists planting specimen gardens as well as the keepers of royal gardens, including Kew Gardens in London.

“The Bartrams [John and his son William—and later, Ann] during their time were the foremost people to talk to about plants. If you wanted to know anything about plants, this is where you would come,” Rasheed says.

Among the prized specimens at Bartram's Garden are a yellowwood tree planted in the late 1700s that blooms with scented white tendrils of flowers in late spring; the oldest ginkgo tree in North America, imported from England and planted in 1785; and the Franklin tree (named for family friend Benjamin Franklin), a species that William Bartram saved from extinction in 1777 by cultivating seeds from a rare tree that he and his father had found decades earlier along a river in southern Georgia. Bartram also had an amazingly varied orchard, and today visitors can walk among 136 varieties of fruit and nut trees bearing everything from persimmons to figs to almonds.

“Some botanic gardens that you go to, everything is very formal and highly maintained. . . . This is a very natural garden; it's mainly native plants,” Rasheed says. “Finding blooms is like a treasure hunt. You don't come and [see] everything in bloom, but you walk around and you see little things popping up out of the ground. And if you come often, you get to see all of the different phases of these plants, which really connects you to nature in a different way than your average botanic garden. . . . It's a more woodland experience.”

[bartramsgarden.org](http://bartramsgarden.org)

## LONGWOOD GARDENS

Last year, readers of *USA Today* voted Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, the Best Botanical Garden in the nation. These internationally renowned botanical gardens sprawl across 1,077 acres with 20 expansive outdoor gardens, meadows and woodlands which, along with 20 rooms of gardens in the conservatory, showcase more than 11,000 types of native and exotic plants from around the world. A slightly larger version of the garden estate of Pierre S. du Pont, great-grandson of the founder of the DuPont Company, Longwood's aesthetic leans heavily toward the European garden styles that enchanted the well-traveled industrialist and conservationist.

As did many of those European gardens, Longwood features extravagant fountain displays, including a fountain garden



## Longwood Gardens

based on that of Villa Gamberaia near Florence, Italy. By far the most impressive of these fountain displays, though, is the Main Fountain Garden fronting the Conservatory, which reopens May 27 after a two-and-a-half-year, \$90 million revitalization that not only restored the ailing 1931 fountain garden—which had been advanced for its day, incorporating the latest technologies introduced at World’s Fairs—but also enhanced it with today’s fountain technology. Where once there were 380 stationary water jets, there now are 1,719 moveable jets that can produce all sorts of special effects, including fountain sprays that resemble woven baskets and “flame nozzles” that feature ignited flames atop jets of water.

“This is our iconic garden, and it’s the masterpiece of our founder,” says Longwood’s Executive Director Paul Redman. “There is nothing else like it in the United States, without question, and to even experience anything close to what we have, you’d have to visit some of the great water gardens of Europe—Versailles [in France] or Villa D’Este in Italy.”

In celebration of the reopening of the Main Fountain Garden, Longwood is hosting its Summer of Spectacle May 27–September 30, with daily fountain shows—including illuminated shows on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings—tours, concerts and special events as well as the return of the popular Fireworks & Fountains shows.

The Main Fountain Garden, while spectacular, is but one of many gems at Longwood. The first stop for many garden-goers, both first-time visitors and longtime members, is Flower Garden Walk, a 600-foot-long walkway punctuated midway by a single-jet fountain and bordered by a profusion of color-coordinated seasonal blooms maintained at peak splendor. Plants are switched out every blooming season for an ever-changing display of magnificence.

The much-photographed main displays in the 4.5-acre Conservatory likewise change dramatically with the seasons. They are complemented by an array of indoor gardens that

include rooms devoted to tropical plants, bromeliads, cacti, roses, orchids and the largest green wall in North America. Come summer, manmade pools in the conservatory courtyard are covered with blooming waterlilies.

With natural forests and manicured gardens; waterfalls, lakes and fountains; and an 86-acre meadow garden that allows guests to experience a bucolic Brandywine Valley landscape complete with a farmhouse, Longwood Gardens claims its place among the great gardens of the world.

[longwoodgardens.org](http://longwoodgardens.org)

## LADEW TOPIARY GARDENS

Look left as soon as you turn onto the main road leading into Ladew Topiary Gardens in Monkton, Maryland, to see topiaries of two huntsmen on horseback leaping a fence as they track a pack of hounds in pursuit of a fox. The whimsical garden scene is not only emblematic of these famed Harford County gardens—once named “the Most Outstanding Topiary Garden in America” by the Garden Club of America—but it’s also an homage to the garden in Britain where Anglophile and avid fox hunter Harvey S. Ladew saw a similar, but much smaller, topiary scene.

Although never formally trained in horticulture, Ladew read widely on the subject and visited great private and public gardens in the U.S. and throughout the world, particularly in Britain. “I think Mr. Ladew got this property, this 250 acres, and all of the ideas that he had and all of his love of topiary and his love of plant material, and he sort of splattered it out here,” says Executive Director Emily Emerick.

Within that 250 acres, Ladew designed 22 acres of formal gardens adjacent to his historic 18th-century manor house (guided tours are offered of the restored, furnished home designed by William Baldwin, one of the foremost American decorators of the time), which he lived in until his death in 1976. Even before that, Ladew had opened his gardens to the public, and the Ladew Topiary Gardens celebrated its 45th anniversary just last year.



## Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

Ladew divided his gardens into 15 connecting “rooms”—individual gardens centered on a theme; for example, there are gardens devoted to colors (red, yellow, white and pink) or plant types (irises, roses, berry-producers). The Garden of Eden, with its sculpture of Adam and Eve, comprises apple and pear trees interspersed with azaleas that erupt in colorful springtime blooms. These smaller garden rooms surround The Great Bowl, a two-acre bowl-shaped lawn (once the site of a swimming pool) that Mr. Ladew created with the help of a local mortician whom he hired “because he thought [the mortician] knew how to dig,” Emerick explains. Topiaries—living sculptures created by training and clipping trees and shrubs—create the structure of the rooms and act as ornamentation within them.

In May and June, the Ladew Gardens are infused with the colors and scents of late spring: azaleas, dogwoods, lilacs, irises, daylilies, hydrangea and a multitude of annuals. “The gardens are like a different exhibit every couple of weeks because something else is blooming, something else has faded, something else is coming up. It’s ever-changing,” Emerick says.

[ladewgardens.com](http://ladewgardens.com)

### LEWIS GINTER BOTANICAL GARDEN

If you’ve ever been to Richmond, Virginia, you’re likely familiar with the domed all-glass conservatory that’s the centerpiece of Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden and has become an iconic image of the city itself. Although built in 2003, the conservatory “is an older, classical style, very much inspired by the conservatory at Kew Gardens in England,” notes garden spokesperson Beth Monroe.

Under that pineapple sculpture-topped dome, visitors find a wonderland of plants both exotic and native, including a tropical wing where more than 200 orchids are in bloom at any given time and, in the summer, a butterfly garden that enchants visitors year after year with species such as the

Mexican bluewing, clothed in a combination of electric blue, white and black; the aqua-tinted banded peacock; the Costa Rica clearwing with its amazing transparent wings; and the orange dead leaf, which looks to all the world like...well, a dead leaf.

Outdoors, more than 50 of the property’s 80 acres are given over to more than a dozen distinct gardens. In Asian Valley, visitors find themselves immersed in a serene space populated by conifers, broad-leafed evergreens, Japanese maples, still and cascading waters, and boulders. A hillside rose garden blooms with more than 2,000 rosebushes giving off their intoxicating perfume. There’s the Woodland Walk as well as an elegant Victorian-style garden and a children’s garden with a wheelchair-accessible treehouse and a hundred-year-old mulberry tree with low hanging branches that kids love to climb.

Among the more unusual—and more popular—of the plants at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden are the rare carnivorous pitcher plants that thrive in the bog-like environment of the West Island Garden. Strolling along the walkway through the one-acre garden, visitors get an up-close view of the fascinating pitcher plants, which capture insects in their tube-shaped foliage and then consume them as a source of nitrogen.

“It sounds a bit macabre, but people are really intrigued by that,” Monroe says. “I especially love to see kids’ eyes light up when you talk about the carnivorous plants. But they’re really gorgeous plants. They’re predominantly green, but some of them have this wonderful red veining, and some are white. Just very interesting and odd-looking plants.

“There’s a lot of variety in the [Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden], but there are a lot of intimate spaces here as well,” Monroe adds. “You walk through and explore a new area almost at every turn.”

[lewisginter.org](http://lewisginter.org)



## Brookside Gardens

### BROOKSIDE GARDENS

Back in the late 1960s, when Montgomery County, Maryland, was just taking off as a bedroom community for the Nation's Capital, planners had a revolutionary idea: a large, multipurpose regional park that would include attractions as diverse as sports fields, horse stables, a historic carousel and a botanic garden. Today that 500-acre park, Wheaton Regional Park, is home to Brookside Gardens, a botanic garden open free to the public, who are welcome to explore 35 acres of developed gardens within a 50-acre fenced-in space. There's even an 11,500-square-foot conservatory that features tropical plants and—in the summer—a butterfly house. (There is a fee for the butterfly attraction.)

"As the county has grown—since 1969 the number of residents in Montgomery County has quadrupled—having this oasis, this green space, this cultivated landscape is really important as a respite from the business and the built-up construction of our community," says Stephanie Oberle, garden director.

The original designers of Brookside Gardens envisioned a series of garden rooms, each providing a different environmental experience for visitors. There's a rose garden, a perennial garden, a trial garden that showcases plants useful to home gardeners, a wedding gazebo and more. Later, additional, less formal gardens were added, such as an aquatic garden and an azalea

garden that's in full bloom in late April and early May.

Perhaps the most unusual garden in the bunch is the 6-acre Japanese-style Gude Garden. "We had a German landscape architect creating his vision of a Japanese garden in kind of a modernistic Bauhaus style, so it's this interesting fusion of German, Japanese, American," Oberle says. "It's an iconic landscape feature with a Japanese-style hill and pond with a Japanese tea house-inspired structure. Very many people, when they think of Brookside Gardens, they think of that structure."

[brooksidegardens.org](http://brooksidegardens.org)

### DELAWARE BOTANIC GARDENS

When the Delaware Botanic Gardens just outside Dagsboro opens in spring 2019, visitors to coastal southern Delaware will experience a different type of garden. Rather than a traditional classic garden in the European style, this community-developed 37-acre garden will showcase the native horticulture of the Mid-Atlantic's coastal plains, with meadow, woodland and wetland gardens leading to 1,000 feet of waterfront along Pepper Creek, which flows into Indian River Bay.

Plans have been in the works for four years, and site preparation began this past March. Visitors will be welcomed to the first phase of the garden—the meadow garden, portions of the woodland garden and the waterfront, and a temporary visitor center—as early as two years from now, but the project won't be



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## Norfolk Botanical Garden

complete for another decade or so after that.

Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf, famous for his work in New York City's Battery Park and Highline Gardens, has been contracted to design the two-acre meadow. "This is a jewel in our garden, to have this world-famous designer involved in the project," says Ray Sander, vice president of the gardens.

"We don't have a center for learning and horticultural experience here in Delmarva. We felt this was something that was missing..." Sander adds. "The Delaware Botanic Gardens will give people [in this region] access to a flagship public garden that will enable them to see the beauty of being outdoors and the kinds of plants that grow in our zone."

**[delawaregardens.com](http://delawaregardens.com)**

### NORFOLK BOTANICAL GARDEN

The 175-acre Norfolk Botanical Garden got its start as a city-sponsored azalea garden, built during the Great Depression by 200 African American women and 20 men sponsored by a federal government Works Progress Administration grant. Today, the 6.5-acre Rhododendron Glade remains a showpiece comprising 300 varieties of rhododendrons and azaleas (a species of rhododendron) as well as dogwoods, magnolias, andromedae and more. Some 623 crepe myrtles, with their distinctive peeling bark, bloom throughout the garden, with a concentration in the Flowering Arboretum that abounds in blooms ranging from the softest pastel pink to watermelon red.

The Norfolk Botanical Garden's Bicentennial Rose Garden is the largest rose collection on the East Coast, with more than 2,600 plants representing 360

varieties, including antique roses, tea roses and hybrid roses. There are 53 themed gardens in all in this city-owned botanical garden, including a 3-acre children's garden where kids are encouraged to get dirty in the soil and wet in the fountains. The newest garden on the grounds comes from an unlikely partnership with O'Connor Brewing Company in Norfolk, which will use the hops, grains and herbs grown in the new Hop and Grain Garden to create Norfolk Botanical Garden beer and other craft brews.

With its seven miles of paved paths adjoining formal gardens, and another seven miles of unpaved paths and nature trails winding through informal gardens, meadows and forest, the Norfolk Botanical Garden is a delight to visit.

"The garden is surrounded by water on three sides and can be explored by foot, tram or by boat through our picturesque canal system. It's one of the only gardens in the country that can be explored all three ways," says garden spokesperson Kelly Welsh.

**[norfolkbotanicalgarden.org](http://norfolkbotanicalgarden.org)**

### UNITED STATES BOTANIC GARDEN

A botanical garden in the Nation's Capital was actually George Washington's idea; he wanted to demonstrate and promote the importance of plants to this new country. Officially established by Congress in 1820, the U.S. Botanic Garden is one of the oldest botanic gardens in North America. It really got going, however, in the mid-19th century, thanks to a collection of several hundred plants gathered during the 1838–1842 United States Exploring Expedition of the Pacific Ocean and surrounding lands. To this day,



### U.S. Botanic Garden

a handful of those 19th-century plants live on in the garden's conservatory.

Located on the National Mall, the U.S. Botanic Garden comprises a 29,000-square-foot conservatory that dates to 1933; a two-acre home demonstration garden, Bartholdi Park, which was renovated just last year; and the three-acre National Garden, which opened in 2006.

The National Garden was originally envisioned as a small rose garden—Congress in 1986 had named the rose the country's "floral emblem"—but when the five then-living U.S. First Ladies got behind a fundraising campaign, they raised enough in private funds to create not only a rose garden but also a water garden, a butterfly garden, a regional garden of plants native to the Mid-Atlantic, and an amphitheater, notes Devin Dotson, public affair specialist for the U.S. Botanic Garden.

Bartholdi Park, just across Independence Avenue from the National Garden, has as its centerpiece the 30-foot-tall, 15-ton cast-iron Bartholdi Fountain, designed in Classical and Renaissance styles by the same Frederic Auguste Bartholdi who designed the Statue of Liberty. The lighted water fountain is particularly enchanting at night. During the day, visitors will want to explore the unique gardens in the two-acre park, which comprise a demonstration garden showcasing plant options and maintenance systems for sustainable landscapes.

Visitors can enjoy nature in bloom year round in the

conservatory, which features 10 themed greenhouse rooms, including those focusing on plants that could be found in a tropical rainforest, desert, Mediterranean-type environment, and the much-loved orchid room that displays some of the 5,000 specimens in the botanic garden's collection.

[norfolkbotanicalgarden.org](http://norfolkbotanicalgarden.org)

### WEST VIRGINIA BOTANIC GARDENS

Morgantown, West Virginia's former reservoir has been dry for years, but if all goes according to plan, the basin will be partially re-flooded in the next decade, to become "visually the soul of the [West Virginia Botanic] Garden," says Executive Director Bill Mills. With roots that stretch back to the early 1980s and founder George Longenecker's dream of a public botanical garden in Monongalia County, the West Virginia Botanic Garden remains a work in progress. The big attraction right now is the trail system—five miles of rustic hiking trails that loop around wetlands and the former reservoir, through dense forest that is home to a multitude of bird species as well as squirrels, rabbits, deer and bear.

The grand plan, expected to consume at least 10 years and \$15 million, calls for a core garden of terraces, multiple vista lawns, naturalistic meadow and wetland gardens, terraced gardens, an 8,000-square-foot visitor center and more.



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## Winterthur Museum

“The West Virginia Botanic Garden is a unique environment that offers visitors from far and wide a transcending experience,” Mills says. “We offer many classes, camps and events that add to the fabric of the community experience in Morgantown and to all those who visit.”

[wvbg.org](http://wvbg.org)

### WINTERTHUR MUSEUM, GARDEN & LIBRARY

For the moment, we’ll forget about the 175-room mansion and the exquisite collection of nearly 90,000 objects made or used in America from the 17th to 19th centuries. Instead, we’ll focus on Winterthur estate’s 1,000 acres of meadows, woodlands and gardens, referred to as “a country place museum” by the mansion’s last resident, Henry Francis du Pont, a collector and trained horticulturalist. Sixty of those acres are planted as naturalistic gardens.

“Mr. du Pont was inspired by William Robinson’s idea of a wild garden (made famous in his 1870 book *The Wild Garden*). “It was really the idea of native plants and exotic plants planted together as if they had just naturally occurred—very few straight lines, not a lot of changing out of flowers—but using a lot of perennials, spring wildflowers, bulbs—things that were sort of permanent and would spread,” explains Winterthur Executive Director Chris Strand. “They’re a turn-of-the-century idea, and they’re actually kind of ephemeral, so if you stop taking care of them, they disappear—because they don’t have a lot of hardscape and formal design to them.”

As a result, very few of those “wild gardens” remain today. “Winterthur’s [garden] is really one of the last surviving of its era. ... There are maybe two in

England that would be of a similar era, but they weren’t maintained and had to be restored at one point,” while Winterthur’s garden has been continually maintained in the way that du Pont had intended, Strand notes. “Some of the plants [Mr. du Pont grew] are no longer available in the trade, but we propagate them and put them back continuously in order to maintain the design intent that Mr. du Pont had. The garden should be entirely recognizable should Mr. du Pont’s ghost come back tomorrow and wander around the garden.”

In May, Azalea Woods, for instance, is awash in hundreds, if not thousands, of blooming azaleas, including the original Japanese Kurume azaleas bought by Mr. du Pont. He brought an almost painterly approach to arranging the azaleas, playfully contrasting and complementing lavenders, pinks and whites and juxtaposing the same color in subtly different shades for texture and depth. Sycamore Hill was du Pont’s late May–early June garden, filled with hydrangea, butterfly bushes, lilacs and dogwoods. The reflecting pool near the house also shows itself well in late spring with late-blooming azaleas and the emergence of the waterlilies.

Visitors can explore the garden paths on their own on by foot, or take a 20-minute narrated Garden Tram tour that features garden highlights and introduces visitors to Winterthur’s history.

[winterthur.com](http://winterthur.com)

Notable public botanical gardens grow in such abundance in our region that we simply couldn’t include them all. We encourage you to explore your local gardens and to investigate the gems you’ll find on your travels throughout the Mid-Atlantic