

DELAWARE Beach Life

HISTORY | PEOPLE | HOMES | ARTS | NATURE | DINING

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INSIDE

Botanic Gardens

What was a monoculture is now the site of a diverse ecosystem page 36

Culinary Coast

Former Back Porch owners were part of a dining evolution page 60

Our Friend Flicka

When your husband acquires a boat, be ready to go along for the ride page 46

From Soybeans To Splendor

Botanic Gardens transform a monoculture into a thriving, vivid display of diversity BY LYNN R. PARKS

Not too many years ago, the small farm field on the south side of Piney Neck Road, about 2 miles east of Dagsboro's Main Street, was dedicated to the growing of soybeans.

No other plants were welcome there — any that appeared were quickly dispatched by the cultivator or sprayed with an herbicide. “This was a monoculture,” says horticulturist Brian Trader. “Just one plant grew here, year after year after year.”

That was the situation in 2013. But things are very different now. What was just a sea of beans is home to tens of thousands of blooming plants, grasses, trees and shrubs, most of them native to the Delmarva Peninsula.

“Just look at this now,” Trader says. “Instead of just one plant, we have a great diversity of plants, and with that all of the associated species that the plants support. You can't beat that.”

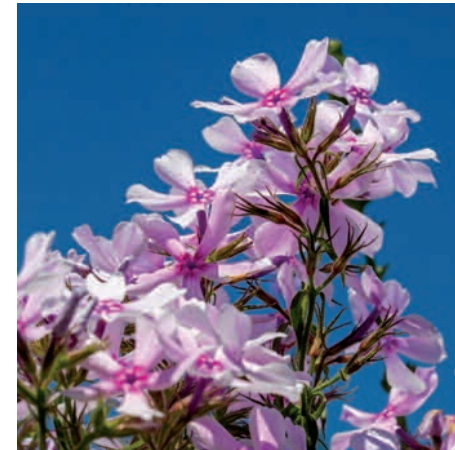
Trader, a native of Virginia's Eastern Shore, is the director of horticulture and deputy executive director of the Delaware Botanic Gardens at Pepper Creek, located

on the 25-acre former soybean field as well as an adjacent 12-acre woods. The land, known as the Cannon Tract, is owned by the Sussex County Land Trust, which purchased it in 2006 and leases it to the gardens for \$1 a year.

Planning for the project began in 2012 and organizers held a groundbreaking ceremony in December 2016. The garden opened to the public last fall. (While the grounds remain open during the coronavirus pandemic, only DBG members are allowed in under restrictions enacted to curb spread of the pathogen. In mid-July, Swed said that the board hoped to be able to open the gardens to the public in August.)

On an unseasonably cool late spring day, Executive Director Sheryl Swed and her husband, Raymond Sander, who is president of the board, visited the gardens. A sweet scent

From tickseed, top left photo, to bee balm, bottom right, the Delaware Botanic Gardens near Dagsboro is home to an abundance of blooming plants, most of them native to coastal Sussex. But not all life in the gardens is of the plant variety. Hidden among the flowers is a young green frog, its tadpole tail still attached. And a bee, its legs covered in pollen, is busy in the bee balm.



suddenly caught Swed's attention; Trader, who was walking with them, told her that the aroma was from a nearby patch of the *Phlox paniculata* "cultivar" (or cultivated variety) known as Lavender Cloud, that had started blooming that week.

Down the path, gaura (commonly known as beeblossoms), milkweed and anemones were just beginning their summer show. And in the woods, ferns had filled in an area next to a vernal pool. The pool, which typically is there in the spring-time and dries up over the summer, provides habitat for young amphibians and reptiles.

"Everything is so lush," Swed said, admiring the ferns. "Each time that we visit, things look different. Even from day to day, we can see how things have grown."

Sander says that when supporters were able to see the gardens for the first time at last fall's grand opening, "it was very rewarding. This isn't Longwood Gardens or the Mt. Cuba Center" — a botanical garden near Hockessin — "but when people saw the beauty of the property, it brought tears to their eyes. This really is becoming everything we hoped it would be."

The meadow

The heart of the site is a wildflower meadow, planned by internationally known garden designer Piet Oudolf. Among projects he has worked on are the Lurie Garden at Millennium Park in Chicago and the High Line in New York City, a native plant garden on a repurposed elevated train track.

Oudolf, who lives in Holland, says he was attracted to the Delaware Botanic Gardens project largely by the dedication of the people who were planning it. His interest was captured "by the enthusiasm of the community supporting the idea [of] a garden that would attract people from all over the county and farther," he says.

His vision for the meadow was inspired by the topography of the land itself, including its wetlands, as well as by conversations with the people involved in development of the property.

The meadow, roughly in the shape of an ampersand, is divided into three sections. Each of them — upper, middle and lower — has different plants in it. Those in the lower section include helenium (sneezeweed), coneflowers and asters. In the middle section are

prairie blazing star, false indigo and three cultivars of aster.

The upper section has several blooming plants, including milkweed, as well as clusters of little bluestem, a native bluish-green grass that blooms in July and that turns orange when the summer is over. "It is really beautiful in the fall," Sander says. "When the wind blows, it looks like waves of copper moving through the meadow."

Oudolf doesn't design gardens with just color in mind. He also takes into account the "architecture" of the plant: its stems and branches and any seed pods it may develop. Even after the plant is laid bare by frost, what is left behind can be beautiful and interesting.



"A plant flowers only a short period in a year," the designer and author says. "Therefore, character and performance of a plant over the year is as important. The garden for me is a year-round experience. A plant can be interesting with seed heads or winter skeletons."

In the upper section of the meadow garden, in the center of the circle that is the top part of the ampersand, is a grass mound, sculpted according to Oudolf's instructions to provide an elevated vantage point — in flat coastal Sussex — for viewing the garden.

"We think that the mound will be the perfect place to hold weddings," Swed says. Children who have visited the gardens have already discovered that it's perfect for something else: rolling down. "They love it."

The woods

When Swed first walked through the property's woods, she had trouble making her way.

"The understory was choked with greenbrier," says Delaware's state naturalist, Bill McAvoy, who consulted in the development of the project and who visited in its very beginnings. "The first time I was there, I thought, 'Oh, my goodness, they've got their work cut out for them.'"

The gardens' corps of volunteers was up to the task, though. They cleared the woods of the briars that had blocked Swed's way and then put in 1½ miles of pathways that wind through the trees to the edge of Pepper Creek. The trails are

TOP: Rob Wisniewski, a volunteer for the Delaware Botanic Gardens, works in the Rhyne Garden in the facility's parking lot. The garden, which helps to manage stormwater runoff, is planted in wild indigo, coneflowers, phlox, bee balm and soft rush. This fall, volunteers will add two rows of red maples.

RIGHT: The Welcome Center looks out over the lower section of the Meadow Garden.

BELOW: Pink flowering muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) forms a cloud of color in the Meadow Garden in the fall.



When people saw the beauty of the property, it brought tears to their eyes. This really is becoming everything we hoped it would be.





paved in pine “fines,” tiny pieces of pine bark, compressed so that the surface is smooth enough for a wheelchair.

Dave Bartoo, an outdoor recreational planner with the state Division of Parks & Recreation, assisted in mapping out the paths. In doing so, he took into account the natural features of the land, including terrain, elevation and locations of wetlands and Pepper Creek, as well as the trees and shrubs that were growing there. “Where do we want to take people along their journey?” he says of the operative concept in planning. “There are a lot of little neat features in the woods, including some big trees, that we want people to see. We don’t want it to be a boring walk. We want it to be interesting and dynamic.”

Throughout the woods are several large “nests,” circular constructions 10 feet across with 3-foot walls made from twigs and branches that workers have cleared from the forest. In addition to being nice to look at, Trader says, the nests provide habitat for insects and spiders, which in turn feed birds, snakes and lizards.

The highest point on the property is the Knoll, in the heart of the woods and 16 feet above sea level. From the peak,

A wooden platform stretches over the pond in the Dogfish Head Learning Garden, a constructed freshwater wetland habitat typical of coastal Sussex. Part of the gardens’ mission is to be an educational center.

which is accessible by a trail as well as by a flight of shallow stone steps, visitors can see Pepper Creek. “This is a great place to stop and meditate or listen to the birds,” Trader says.

The property has 1,000 feet of frontage along the creek, a tidal tributary that joins with Vine Creek before it flows into the Indian River Bay. The creek is about 800 feet wide as it flows past the gardens; on the other side of the water is Holland Point.

Plans call for eventual construction of a pier overlooking the water, as well as a boardwalk and a birdwatching station. All of that is in accordance with the gardens’ mission, to be “for the benefit and enjoyment of all.”

Learning centers

The DBG mission statement also calls for the gardens to be an educational center, teaching specifically about Delaware’s native ecosystems, as well as about environmental stewardship. The

Living Shoreline

Delaware Botanic Gardens has received permits from the state to begin work on a shoreline stabilization project along Pepper Creek.

Global sea-level rise means that the creek’s water will push inland, chipping away at the gardens’ 12-acre woodland, says Brian Trader, DBG’s director of horticulture and deputy executive director. The encroaching salty water also endangers freshwater pools in the forest.

The project, which will be done in conjunction with the Delaware Center for the Inland Bays, will include installation of a “toe,” or barrier, anchored along the edge of the water, just above the low-tide mark. The toe, which will be made of logs and smaller branches and twigs, fastened together with screws and twine, will reduce the intensity of the creek’s waves, lessening the erosion they cause.

Trader says the DBG hopes to have the project completed by fall. Work will be done by employees and volunteers at the botanic gardens, with help from folks at the Center for the Inland Bays. ■

Dogfish Head Learning Garden (recipient of a grant from the Dogfish Head Craft Brewery in Milton) is a constructed freshwater wetland habitat typical of coastal Sussex.

The designer is Todd Fritchman of Envirotech, a Lewes-area environmental consulting business. Plants in this area of the garden include blue flag iris and salt-marsh cordgrass; the upland areas are planted in a variety of wildflowers. Fritchman calls the wetland an “amphibian reproduction center,” the perfect growing-up place for green frogs, leopard frogs and toads.

The Rhyne Garden, completed this spring, is in a dug-out section that runs down the center of the parking area. (“Rhyne” is what a drainage ditch or canal is called in some areas of England.) With 12,000 flowering plants that, when fully grown, will provide blankets of color, the rhyne catches water that drains off the parking area and allows it to slowly soak into the ground. “This reduces the amount of runoff from our parking lot,” Sander notes.

Plants in the Rhyne Garden include wild indigo (*Baptisia*), coneflowers (2,000 of them, in vivid colors), phlox and monarda, also called bee balm or bergamot. Growing in a row down the center of the rhyne, in the deepest part of the depression, is soft rush (*Juncus effuses*). All of the plants “don’t mind getting their feet wet,” Trader says, and also will thrive during dry weather.

This October, two rows of red maples will be planted in the parking lot, 12 in each row. The trees (*Acer rubrum* Brandywine) are currently being grown in a nursery in North Carolina. “They will provide beautiful fall color,” Trader says.

The Folly, at the edge of the woodland, is one of the few areas in the gardens that have non-native plants. More than 35,000 bulbs, including daffodils and lilies, have been planted among

To Support the Gardens

Memberships to the Delaware Botanic Gardens are available in a variety of levels, including \$95 for individuals and \$200 for families. For more information about joining, as well as about volunteering in the gardens, visit delawaregardens.org. ■

trees and along curving paths. At the center of the Folly is a rectangular open-air sitting area. The short walls of the area are made of bricks from the foundation of the Cannon Tract’s farmhouse. (The house was burned down years ago in a training exercise by the Dagsboro Volunteer Fire Department.)

“On a hot summer day, there’s no place more refreshing than this garden,” Sander says.

The fundraising

All of this costs money, and since its start in 2012, the gardens’ board has focused much of its attention on fundraising. So far, those efforts have yielded more than \$4 million. That includes a \$750,000 grant from the Longwood Foundation in Wilmington and contributions from the Sussex County Council. The state has also donated to the cause, pledging \$100,000 in the 2019 Bond Bill and \$200,000 in the 2020 bill. In addition, the board holds a benefit dinner every year, which is consistently sold out.

The gardens have also received in-kind donations from area businesses. “A number of companies have gone above and beyond, delivering much more than they promised,” Sander says. “They want to be part of something that’s good for the people of Sussex County.”

Big plans

Delaware Botanic Gardens is already a lovely, interesting place to visit. “It’s so peaceful here,” Swed says.

But the work that has been done there is just part of Phase 1 of an eight-phase development. In addition to the boardwalk and birdwatching area in the woods, plans call for construction of a 1.5-acre freshwater pond, lined along the northern edge with bald cypress trees; a Gallery Garden, with perfectly groomed hedges and an expanse of lawn, designed as a place where events can be held; demonstration gardens; and a Cascade Garden, with fountains and waterfalls.

The board also has plans for restrooms and a visitor pavilion, drawn up by Scott Edmonston, owner of SEA Studio Architects in Bethany Beach. The



Piet Oudolf, internationally known garden designer, works on getting the contours of a raised mound near the Meadow Garden exactly right. Oudolf, who lives in Holland, says that he was enticed to work for the Delaware Botanic Gardens by the enthusiasm of its supporters.

restrooms could be completed by the end of the year, Swed says; the Annette Pennoni Meadow Pavilion, named in memory of a supporter of the gardens who died in July 2019 and in honor of a contribution to the gardens by her husband, Chuck, could be completed by the spring of 2022.

Swed and Sander aren’t worried that, in the end, they will build it and people won’t come. Oudolf’s involvement alone is enough to make the grounds “a destination for garden enthusiasts from around the world,” Swed wrote to members in the project’s 2019 annual report.

“Piet’s work is a real attraction,” Sander says. “People have told us that with his Meadow Garden here, we will encourage visits from people who right now don’t even know where Delaware is.” ■

Lynn R. Parks is a frequent contributor to Delaware Beach Life.



MORE PHOTOS Pay a virtual visit to the Delaware Botanic Gardens at delawarebeachlife.com/featuredphotos.

Volunteer Corps

Carol McCloud, vice president of the Delaware Botanic Gardens board, oversees the project's volunteer corps, which has 286 people. She first learned about plans for the gardens during an outreach event in late 2015.

"They had just cleared the land and had easels set up all over, explaining what they planned to do," she recalls. At the time, she was president of the Barefoot Gardeners, a gardening club based in Fenwick Island, and attended the event to see if the gardens would be something the club's members would be interested in helping with.

"We didn't get five minutes into the event, and I was hooked," she says. The energy of the planners and volunteers was contagious.

And then there were the gardens themselves. "There's nothing like planting something and seeing it thrive," McCloud says. For her and the fellow volunteers, "working in the soil fills our souls."

State naturalist Bill McAvoy has high praise for the corps: "That volunteer group is phenomenal. The dedication that they have is really unusual, and what they've been able to accomplish is really impressive."

McAvoy's praise extends to the gardens' board of directors, also an all-volunteer group. "Whatever the situation, high-quality leadership is really important," he says. In this case, "the people at the top are all motivated and dedicated." ■



Volunteers set out plants in the Rhyne Garden in mid-spring. The Delaware Botanic Gardens have a corps of nearly 300 volunteers who plant, weed and trim. And they are dedicated: Even on a hot July day, with temperatures hovering around 94 degrees, more than a dozen volunteers showed up to work.

