

# Chicago Botanic Garden

**Chicago Botanic Garden is unusual in that its display gardens are built on islands surrounded by acres of water. Deborah McMillin picks some of the most interesting features**

A June visit to my hometown and family in Geneva, Illinois, allowed me the opportunity to visit the Chicago Botanic Garden with my mother and my sisters Suzanne and Marcy. We took a late morning drive to the outlying northern Chicago suburb of Glencoe, which is the home of this popular botanic Midwest garden, managed by the Chicago Horticulture Society.

The 385 acre site was originally swampland used for truck farming and barrow pits for the construction of the Eden expressway nearby. Soil had to be brought in for the garden and islands were formed when areas for lakes were flooded with water from nearby Lake Michigan. The garden is unique in its design of 24 display gardens situated on nine islands surrounded by 81 acres of water linked by bridges and walkways. With limited time I chose the display gardens that were my priority.

## Illinois flora

The native flora of Illinois was represented in the three display gardens of woodlands, the sun-loving plants of the prairie and a habitat garden. The examples of native grasses and summer wild flowers were familiar with common names such as columbine, honeysuckle, wild quinine, foxglove, butterfly weed, indigo, coneflower, spurge, prairie sedge, blue flag iris, magnolia, blue phlox, coreopsis and Solomon's seal. Natural habitats, especially the tall grass prairies, are threatened by climate, urbanization and invasive species. In response, the Chicago Botanic Garden is working in partnership with the Millennium Seed Bank Project developed by the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew. Seeds from native species across the Midwest and northern Great Plains, with an emphasis on tall grass prairie species, have been collected for Kew's seed bank.

## The Rose Garden

Roses are popular in the States and the Rose Garden had on display 5,000 rose bushes representing over 150 rose



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varieties from miniatures to tall hybrid rugosas. There is an emphasis on hardiness because Chicago suffers from fickle winter weather with occasional mild days intermingled with several weeks of temperatures below freezing. In summer the humidity is moderately high with temperatures from 26°C to 33°C. The growing season is short in Illinois. The fragrance of the roses, their bloom period, their disease and insect resistance and their historic value are also considered. It was decided that David Austin roses that had the look and fragrance of old garden roses but which were also repeat blooms, such as 'Heritage', 'Abraham Darby', 'English Garden Rose' and 'Ambridge Rose', were most suitable for this garden. For winter protection, shredded leaf mulch is mounded 20.5 – 25.5 cm over the base of the plants. The deep lavender flowers and strong fragrance of *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead' planted in mass borders, was a perfect companion to the roses.

### **The English Walled Garden**

Near to the Rose Garden is the English Walled Garden designed by John Brookes about 20 years ago. He took the approach that English gardens have changed in style throughout history, so he designed six individual garden rooms each with its own mood. John Brookes has said that 'featured heavily within this acre site is a mixture of Sissinghurst, Great Dixter and a bit of Hidcote'. Chilstone Garden Ornaments in Kent provided reconstituted stone balustrades, columns, urns and finials for the individual gardens to provide the period feel.

Construction of the walled garden required the use of one-metre footings in concrete throughout the site, even for the smaller walls, because of the severe Chicago

### **Below: The Krasberg Rose Garden**



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**Above: the Formal Daisy Garden**

winters. Since the majority of climbing plants would be deciduous, textured brick and latticework panels were used to breakup and provide texture to the bare brick effect during the winter months. Internal compartments were created with yews 2 metres in height and apple trees used as a backbone to the garden. John Brookes worked closely with the garden's chief horticulturist so that any plants in his schematics that were not suitable for the Chicago weather were replaced by local hardy plants.

An old-fashioned English perennial border packed with bulbs, perennials, annuals and shrubs runs against the outside wall of the garden, on either side of tall wooden gates. The June border includes tall spikes of *Digitalis purpurea*, *Allium giganteum*, and *Alcea rosea* 'Double Apricot' and 'Nigra.' with the soft pink spikes of *Astilbe x arendsii* in bloom.

The Courtyard Garden representing a 19th century retreat to nature for city residents is the first garden inside the gates. It presents a subdued mood with apple trees providing shade and benches for sitting. A cistern on the wall provides the soothing sound of water. The planting scheme is relaxing using white blooms of *Astilbe* 'Bridal Veil', *Hydrangea* 'Annabelle', sweet alyssum, African daisy and shining meadow rue, against the textured green leaves of hosta. A splash of red pelargonium in containers provides a simple but effective contrast.

The Formal Daisy Garden combines the strict symmetry of the Renaissance garden with natural plantings popular in the 1800s. The garden showcased the sun-loving plants of the *Asteraceae* family. Varieties of coreopsis, chrysanthemum,





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#### **Above: the Checkerboard Garden**

echinacea, helianthus, Shasta daisy, rudbeckia, zinnia and feverfew fill the square beds. High evergreen hedges that surrounds the formal garden provides privacy. Overlooking the Daisy Garden is the Vista Garden, with view towards the Evening Island and the Great Basin. This is reminiscent of the English Garden in the 1700s where distant views were included as part of the garden design. An octagonal sunken pool is planted with water lilies, flag irises and white arum lilies.

The Checkerboard Garden is a series of beds with checkerboard squares of sheared mounds of silver wormwood (*Artemisia schmidtiana*) contrasting with manicured squares of green boxwood, espaliered crab apples and yew walls. Topiary represents the 500 years the English have trimmed hedges into fanciful patterns. A circular fountain pool, wisteria vines with lavender flowers, blue clematis and rambler roses supported by classical stone columns or wooden arbors in the Pergola Garden, are reminiscent of Edwardian Gardens.

In contrast to the symmetry of the Checkerboard Garden is the Cottage Garden, a profusion of the bold colours of old-time perennials. Vegetables, herbs and strawberry plants are tucked among flowers. It was the practical garden of rural working families before it became a popular garden style in the 1800s. The Cottage Garden is what we quickly recognize as an English Garden. What appears as a spontaneous mix of familiar and popular perennials with traditional common names, also flourishes in a large part of our country.

The Walled Garden was officially opened in October 1991, by HRH Princess Margaret. John Brookes has regularly returned to Chicago to check on the garden.

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With the staff he reviews maintenance needs, such as tree thinning or the removing and pruning of shrubs to keep them at an appropriate size. Plants that are not doing well, whether from the winter cold or hot and humid summers, are replaced with his suggestions.

### **The Japanese Garden**

A Kasuga stone lantern and a weeping willow tree grace the curved bridge that crosses the lake leading to the Japanese Garden, opened in 1982 as a four-season garden against the odds of Chicago's climate. The garden is named Sansho-En the 'garden of three islands', with only two of the islands connected. Horaijima, the third island of Everlasting Happiness symbolizes paradise, an island for immortals where no man can go. The late Dr. Koichi Kawana designed this traditional 17-acre Japanese stroll garden, utilizing plants native to the area. Bushes, plants and trees from Japan and other parts of the world that could be pruned in the Japanese manner, and which tolerate the climate and alkaline soil of



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the Midwest, are also incorporated into the landscape.

Scots Pine trees thrive in northern climates where Asian trees would not be vigorous or survive. The Scots Pines predominately used in the Japanese Garden are 40-50 years old, and have had their branches trained in a stylized manner to appear further aged and weathered. Underground anchors with cables attached to the branch applied the pressure to lay each branches in a horizontal position. It is labour intensive (570 staff hours) to 'candle' the 172 pine trees yearly. In the spring each new sprout of growth on the branches of the trees, which has the appearance of a candle, is individually hand pinched out to maintain the characteristic shape of the tree.

A panoramic view of the islands revealed the formality and starkness of the uncluttered landscape. The pink flowers of the *Spiraea japonica* 'Little Princess', sedums and mother-of-thyme tucked among the rocks can only be seen while walking on the curved paths. Varieties of hydrangea, hostas, with azaleas and the hardy *Rhododendron catawbiense* 'Roseum Elegans' were in the shady part of the



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**Top: pathway to the three islands. Left: Japanese Garden of Sansho-En. Centre: Stylized Scots Pine. Right: Yukimi snow lantern.**



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garden. Native blue flag iris (*Iris virginica shrevei*) was in bloom when I was there. Heavy clumps of the pickerel weed plant (*Pontederia cordata*), a native aquatic with violet blue flowers, grow at the water edge of the lake. Many of the flowering annuals and perennials in this garden have a short bloom time reflecting the fleeting quality of human life. Ornamental Crab Apple trees and Japanese Maples would provide colour for spring and fall interest. Winter will complete the cycle. As a native of Illinois I can envision the stark pines casting fascinating shadows against ground covered in deep snow where solitary footprints are left by garden wildlife.

### **The Circle Garden**

Water displays are prominent features in the individual gardens, often with benches nearby encouraging visitors to linger, enjoy, and reflect on the garden.

The Circle Garden was predominately a showcase of annuals with a mix of shrubs, grasses, bulbs, and tender to hardy perennials. This display was used to show combinations of styles, colours, forms and textures that could be used throughout the growing season in residential gardens. At the centre of the garden a fountain spouted patterns of cool water, surrounded by annuals with white blooms and silver foliage that created an ethereal effect. Lively displays of annuals surrounded the perimeter of the garden.

### **The Fruit and Vegetable Garden**

The Fruit and Vegetable Garden is located on a 40-acre island which provides room for several apple and pear orchards. The Chicago Botanic Garden follows organic gardening practices for growing fruit and vegetables. The botanic gardeners encouraged visitors to do the same, eager to explain their growing methods. In June the apple trees in the orchard were shrouded with the white powder of Kaolin clay, which made the leaves and fruit less appealing to insects for food and egg laying. To educate the public



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**Left: The Circle Garden fountain. Centre annual display in the Circle Garden. Right: the Rose Petal Fountain another of the prominent water displays in the garden.**

on small space gardening for city yards, there are examples of how vertical space can be used with arbors for grapes, trellises for kiwi vines and traditional English brick walls with espaliered fruit trees. Intensive gardening beds are packed with ground vegetables to pole beans and sunflowers added a bright ornamental touch.

In a short period of time, the Chicago Botanic Garden has made impressive contributions to ornamental plant breeding. The emphasis is on new perennials that will thrive in soils and climates similar to the Midwest. Dr Jim Ault, director of Plant Research had brought to our gardens the first coneflower with orange blossoms, *Echinacea* 'Arts Pride' or Orange Meadowbrite™. His goal is to produce hybrids in novel shades of blooms plus increased drought and cold tolerance for greater longevity. Mango Meadowbrite with mango yellow petals appeared as a chance mutation of the Orange Meadowbrite. Soft pink blooms can be found on the Pixie Meadowbrite, the first true dwarf hybrid coneflower. Several new varieties of *Baptisia* entered the market recently. This spring I will be looking in my local garden centre for introductions of *Echinacea* 'Burgundy fireworks,' *Monarda* 'Fire Marshall,' and *Veronica* 'Tidal Pool', all contributions from the Chicago Botanic Garden. In the summer I will enjoy the colour of orange, the honeysuckle fragrance of the mango and a border of pink echinacea that do so well in my east coast Virginia Beach garden.

For my American Gardener friends who may not be able to take a trip to England, I tell them to visit the Chicago Botanic Garden Walled Garden for a stroll through English gardening history. I have only been able to give you a snapshot of what this garden has to offer but if your vacation takes you to the Midwest of my country, schedule a day for a tour of this 21st century garden. It is an Illinois treasure representing the diversity of the flora of the Great Plains.