

Garden Day Blooms

The May tradition is a rite of spring. This year's anniversary promises to be spectacular.

BY EILEEN SMITH DALLABRIDA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM SCOTT

For 70 years, Wilmington Garden Day has been a harbinger of spring, returning as surely and splendidly as the tender buds of May.

This year, guests can expect clouds of peonies surrounding a formal terrace, a party barn with a resort-like vibe, a swimming pool designed to look like a natural pond, and a plot the depth of a city block bursting with blue-ribbon winners from the Philadelphia Flower Show.

"If you love beautiful gardens, this is one day you mark on your calendar year after year," says Deborah Sweeney, Garden Day chair.

An Evening in the Garden, introduced in 2008, is a \$125-a-ticket fundraiser, held on the Thursday before the tour. This year's event takes place at Foxspring, the stately home of Tina and Pete Hayward.

"It's a fine time in Wilmington, with Garden Day and Point-to-Point, and then the Flower Market the week after," Tina Hayward says. "When the azaleas are in bloom, we know that summer is around the corner."

Garden Day first bloomed in 1947. World War II was over and home gardeners started replacing the vegetables they grew in their victory gardens with lush beds of shrubs and flowers.

"It was a real morale booster, planting beautiful things after a long war," says Mary Ball Morton of Wilmington, a board member and a longtime Garden Day volunteer.

With men home from the service, many women left the workforce and focused on their homes. They tended their gardens. They had time to volunteer.

Garden Day flourished as estate owners in Chateau Country opened their manicured grounds to the public on the first Saturday each May, rain or shine.

These days, there are fewer estates and more suburban and city gardens, where visitors can pluck a bouquet of



ideas they can readily translate to their own properties.

Volunteers are harder to come by. And Garden Day is making adjustments, pruning its roster of gardens and establishing new roots as an independent nonprofit group.

Rooted in Tradition

Tom Scott grew up with Garden Day. His mother, Muff, was an ardent leader and volunteer until her death last fall at 96. This year's tour is dedicated to her.

"I was compelled to volunteer at an early age. I was probably 6," says Scott, now in his 60s and the organization's treasurer.

Today, lists of prospective volunteers are gathered electronically. Most appeals are made by email.

Muff Scott, an accomplished arm twister, believed in the personal touch. She kept lists on paper, perusing them at the dining room table. She worked the phone, calling recruits to persuade them to volunteer.

"It was impossible to say no to her," her son says.

In the beginning, Garden Day was affiliated with the Episcopal Church. Throughout its history, proceeds have been donated to groups that benefit underserved children.

Over the years the ranks of volunteers withered as church membership declined. The Cathedral Church

The 70th annual Wilmington Garden Day will take place Saturday, May 6, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Children under 12 admitted free. Rain or shine. To order tickets, volunteer or learn more, visit www.wilmingtongardenday.org.

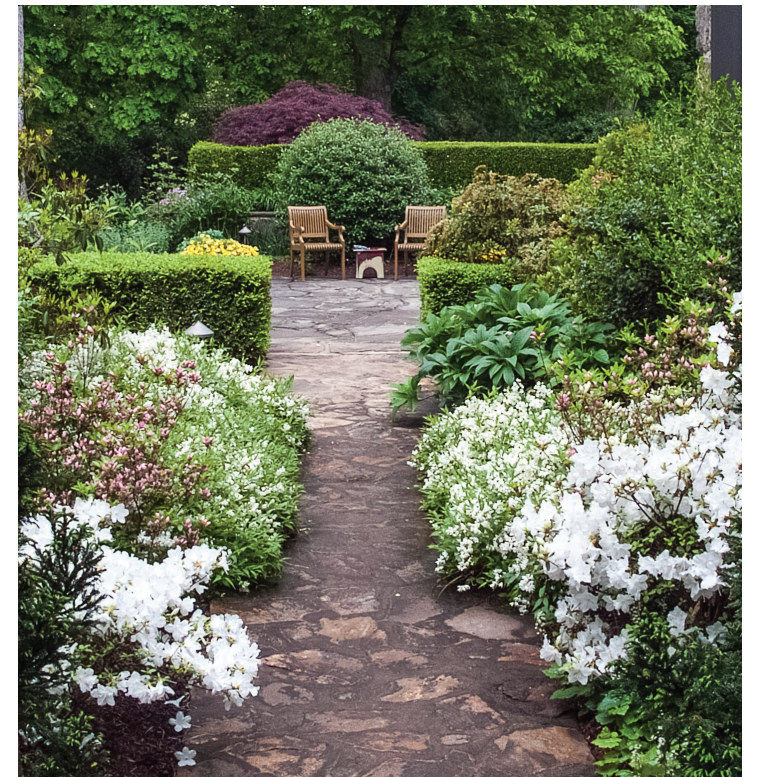
of St. John in Wilmington closed its doors. Other volunteers died or became too frail to serve.

Three years ago, Garden Day fell well short of the 200 volunteers needed to staff the tour. To close the gap, stalwarts stepped up and worked double shifts. They tapped teenage children and grandchildren to fill in.

After the tour, the board contemplated the future of the event. Would Garden Day die on the vine? Or could this time-honored tradition flourish once more?

Planting New Ideas

The next spring, an invigorated Garden Day returned. Sweeney, a retired elementary school princi-





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pal, was recruited to chair the organization. Lisa Ford, director of digital marketing at Capital One, agreed to become vice president.

“She mentioned that she used to tour on Garden Day with her mother, so we roped her in,” Scott says. He notes that by the turn of the 21st century, most of Garden Day’s leaders were in their 80s. “We very much needed to attract new people and do new things,” he says.

The group reorganized as Wilmington Garden Day Inc., a 501(c)(3) organization. It launched a Facebook page and began selling advance tickets on Groupon.

Garden Day continues to receive support from volunteers at Episcopal churches, including Christ Church in Greenville, St. Nicholas in Newark, and Sts. Andrew and Matthew, St. David, St. Barnabas, and Trinity in Wilmington.

“We’re reaching out to Presbyterians, too,” Scott says. St. Michael’s School and Nursery and Friendship House, the organizations that benefit from the event, also send volunteers.

The Haywards, longtime Garden Day supporters, are opening Foxspring, inside and out, to preview party guests. It’s an ideal setting for entertaining, with an open air terrace and stone walls that define outdoor rooms. The focal point of a welcoming gathering area is a huge planter, once the smokestack of a Middletown fire engine.

Tina Hayward does most of the gardening herself, enjoying a landscape that evolves naturally with the seasons.

“It’s the garden my children grew up in, and it’s

a relaxing place, not at all formal,” she says. “I love lilacs, crocus and azaleas in the spring, plants that make me happy.”

The Garden Path

This year, there are fewer gardens on the tour, and properties are clustered so visitors can make fewer stops. There will be 13 gardens, many with homes and pools, in Greenville, Centreville, Alapocas and the Highlands neighborhood in Wilmington.

“We have consciously reduced the number of gardens so people have a better shot of getting to most of them,” Sweeney says. “This year, we are especially excited because we have the opportunity to showcase a number of homes in the city of Wilmington.”

Scott and his wife, Betsy, will open their home and garden in Centreville for the third time.

Anchored with mature trees and shrubs, the garden blooms with seven classical planting areas, four in heavy shade and three in partial sun.

“We’ve added a bog garden that attracts frogs,” Betsy Scott says. “We chose plants that live on the nutrients in the pond and act as natural filters to keep the pond clean.”

Whimsy is in full bloom with a 30-foot-tall wooden giraffe carved from a tree that was struck by lightning. A two-story tree house is connected to a smaller tree fort with a swinging rope bridge.

Betsy Scott and Ashlin Bray, both board members, are tasked with identifying interesting homes and gardens, then persuading the homeowners to open their properties for the tour.

They often learn about homes through the grapevine of gardeners. Occasionally, Scott makes a cold call, tapping the brakes when she spies an attractive landscape.

“She knocks on doors,” her husband says. “She says, ‘I think you’re doing a great job. How would you like to be in Garden Day?’”

Digging Out

Getting a garden up and running by the first Saturday in May is not an easy task. An unseasonably chilly spring delays the growing season. Heavy rains limit the number of hours gardeners can work outdoors.

“The first year I volunteered we had a terrible winter,” Sweeney says. “One of our gardeners went into her garden a week before the tour and put in bulbs that were blooming because everything was so far behind.”

Rain can dampen the enthusiasm of tour-goers, though Garden Day has never been a washout.

“One year we had a rainy morning and WDEL was broadcasting from one of our sites, telling people we were still out there,” Morton says. “At noon the sun came out and, boy, we were crowded.”

Some gardeners bring in the pros to make deadline. Others shoulder the load themselves, mulching, tidying koi ponds, manicuring shrubbery and unveiling lawn furniture.

“Panic is a motivating element,” says Bray. “You weed, you move plants around, you fill in the holes. You look for new horticultural introductions, make some nice containers and hope for some sun.”

She and her husband, Jim, removed a large tree from in front of their home in Alapocas to create more gardening space. They replaced it with

GARDEN DAY HELPS CHILDREN BLOSSOM

- Wilmington Garden Day Inc. is a nonprofit organization that raises funds to help underserved children in Delaware.
- Proceeds from the tour benefit two local organizations.
- Friendship House is a sanctuary and stepping stone for homeless men, women and children. It operates an emergency shelter, nine halfway houses and three daytime centers. Funds from Garden Day go to Patterson House, which offers transitional housing to homeless women and children and long-term transitional housing for mothers who are committed to job training and life skills training as they resume visitation and custody of their children.
- St. Michael’s School and Nursery, founded in 1890, is Delaware’s oldest early childhood program. Today, 150 children, ages 2 months through second grade, attend school daily, full-time and year-round to get a jump-start on learning. More than 80 percent receive scholarships.

a grove of three *Acer griseum* with exfoliating bark and a line of red twig dogwood.

Behind the house, a bluestone terrace is circled by plantings of bulbs and perennials. A Japanese maple, in a container for years, is now in the ground. Fennel attracts butterflies. *Salvia* lures hummingbirds. Hydrangeas grow unmolested by browsing deer.

No matter how cold or wet the weather is, they will be ready.

“We are, of course, hoping for a warm, sunny day,” Bray says.

Morton, who has been volunteering for more than 20 years, says Garden Day is a reminder of the promise of spring.

“It’s always a beautiful day in the garden,” she says. “People are always so relaxed and happy—and very glad they came out.” □

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