

Look To Area Public Gardens for Ideas and Inspiration

By Marsha Goldberg, Fairfax Master Gardener

You might think the best time to visit public gardens is on pleasant spring or fall days, when flowers or trees are in full bloom, and you can see their abundant colors. But visiting public gardens can be a year-round event, especially if you are planning a new garden or need some inspiration to update your outdoor space. The Washington, D.C., area boasts an abundance of public gardens, most with free admission, that can provide you with plenty of ideas and inspiration to create home gardens with four-season interest.



photo: Bishop's Garden

When you visit a garden, you can:

- Learn about plants that are new to you
- See which varieties, or cultivars, grow best in our area
- Notice which plants go well together and create visual interest when planted in groups
- See what plants look like in all four seasons
- Talk to the gardeners
- Visit the gift shop for classic gardening books, supplies and seeds

Drive around your neighborhood, and you will likely see azaleas, hydrangeas, dogwoods, nandinas, knockout roses and many other beautiful – albeit familiar – plants. These may create an eye-catching palette, but they represent only a tiny portion of the possibilities in the plant world. Public gardens can help you expand your plant repertoire. At a public garden, you will see a profusion of plants that are suited to our environment but are less well-known: osmanthus, with its intoxicating fragrance; camellias, with their rose-like blooms that last well into the cold weather; and epimediums, which form a lovely, non-invasive groundcover under almost any other planting.



Green Spring Garden

photo: Green Spring Garden

Plants in many public gardens are labeled so you will be able to identify these new wonders. You can see how plants actually look in the garden, rather than relying on pictures in a catalog or on a website. You will also be able to see how different plants work together in clusters – something that's harder to do at garden stores, which tend to group similar cultivars together on long tables.

While public gardens look beautiful and enhance the area in which they are located, most are funded to provide information to the public and serve an educational purpose. You will often find the gardener working right there when you visit, and chances are, he or she will be happy to answer any questions you have about specific plants, such as how to care for them, their watering needs and when and how to prune. Furthermore, many gardeners do not mind if you take a little snip from a plant to propagate it. However, please get permission first! One Smithsonian Institution gardener told me he is happy to share

cuttings, but he would like people to ask before snipping so they don't damage plants that are the subjects of research or data collection. A gardener at the United States National Arboretum told me the same thing, adding that if he has a beautiful plant, he wants to share it with others and spread it around. Could there be a better reason to visit a garden?

photo: Meadowlark Garden



Meadowlark Garden

Don't wait for spring or summer to go. You can get valuable information even when a garden is dormant. Without the greenery or flowers, you can see the "bones" of the garden, which will help you decide how to structure your space. How will that shrub look in a winter garden? Will it contribute interest to your yard? You may never have noticed the beautiful bark when you were paying attention to the leaves and flowers. Which plants hold their color the longest, and which start blooming while it is still frosty outside? Seeing a garden in winter will allow you to see the structure of each plant, and how various plants fit together to create the overall shape of the garden.

Our area is rich with public gardens. You can see most of them listed at D.C. Gardens, an organization that is encouraging people to visit these beautiful spaces. In addition to providing comprehensive information about each garden, the site alerts readers to garden events throughout the year. Visit a garden and become inspired!