
Chicago Tribune

A+E

ARTS+ENTERTAINMENT

At the Botanic Garden, all the pathways are yours



JAMES C. SVEHLA/FOR THE TRIBUNE

Daniel Mearlan, left, and Baeatriz Bigolin consult a Chicago Botanic Garden map, as Alejandra Carbajak takes pictures.

BY STEVE JOHNSON
Tribune reporter

It isn't easy to find all of the serene nooks and calming crannies at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Some of the paths at the park seem perfectly content to go only one way. At least a couple of the themed gardens are best reached by walking through another garden.

But I had made my way up a one-way path to a hilltop garden, the highest natural point on Evening Island and as quiet a spot as you might find in the north suburban nature preserve. The Chicago Botanic Garden has been growing in

MUSEUMS 101

Chicago Botanic Garden

An occasional series with a big-picture look at Chicago area's top museums, zoos and nature parks

popularity and, on this mild, sunny August Friday, was teeming with visitors in some of its more central spots.

"I wish that all these people would go away," one visitor had said earlier, perhaps not recognizing that she was, in fact, one of the people crowding things up.

I was about to sit on one of the hilltop garden's big

rock chunks and reflect on my day at the 385-acre garden, situated 24 miles north of downtown Chicago, in Glencoe, amid some of the Chicago region's priciest properties.

The day had included bicycling and craft beer (so, by definition, a good day); what has to be earth's most surreal model railroad; and so much meticulously landscaped acreage that it

is both inspiring and daunting to the average backyard spade wielder.

I needed to rest my legs and lower back for a spell — you can literally walk all day here — and think about the place and my own gardening sins, which mostly involve omission and its eager sidekick, weeds.

But in one of those coincidences that would seem contrived if you saw it in a movie, in between the time my knees bent to sit and my backside hit the rock, a clatter of deeply resonant bells seemed to peal out

Turn to **Botanic**, Page 6

MUSEUMS

MUSEUMS

Cernan Earth and Space Center
Triton College, 2000 Fifth Ave.,
River Grove; 708-456-0300, triton.edu/cernan

Ongoing: "Apollo/Mars Landscape Diorama": A two-part exhibit commemorates Apollo missions to the moon and looks at future explorations of Mars.

Des Plaines History Center

781 Pearson St., Des Plaines; 847-391-5399, desplaineshistory.org
Through December: "Greetings From Des Plaines": Find out what there is to do when traveling to and from Des Plaines.

DuSable Museum of African American History

740 E. 56th Place; 773-947-0600, dusablemuseum.org

Ongoing: "A Slow Walk to Greatness: The Harold Washington Story": The multimedia exhibition takes a look at the life and legacy of the former mayor.

Frances Willard House

1730 Chicago Ave., Evanston; 847-328-7500, franceswillardhouse.org

Ongoing: "Lifting as We Climb": The exhibit is part of the Evanston Women's History Project, an effort to document the accomplishments of notable Evanston women.



Visitors walk through the Chicago Botanic Garden's Japanese Garden, where the landscaping has a formal and artistic feel.

JAMES C. SVEHLA/PHOTOS FOR THE TRIBUNE

Garfield Park Conservatory
300 N. Central Park Ave.; 773-638-1766, garfieldconservatory.org
Through Oct. 26: Farmers market: Buy fresh and local produce, baked goods and natural products. 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Sunday

Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center
9603 Woods Drive, Skokie; 847-967-4800, ilholocaustmuseum.org
Ongoing: "Zev and Shifra Karkomi Permanent Exhibition": Artifacts, photos, testimonials and more tell a story of the Holocaust, from life in Germany before the war to ghettos and concentration camps and then postwar resettlement, with a focus on Skokie.

Lurie Garden
Millennium Park, Monroe Street and Columbus Drive; lurigarden.org
Ongoing: The 5-acre "Urbs In Horto" (City In a Garden) was designed to celebrate Chicago's ecological growth from marshland to a thriving green city. Special events and tours take place throughout the year to enhance the scenic stroll through nature.

Museum of Contemporary Photography
Columbia College, 600 S. Michigan Ave.; 312-663-5554, mocp.org
Through Oct. 5: "Phantoms in the Dirt": Artists explore the cryptic marks left in nature by human activity, and the tangle and enigmatic significance.

Pullman State Historic Site
11111 S. Forrestville Ave.; 773-660-2341, pullmanmuseum.org
Through Nov. 2: Guided tours of the Pullman factory site the first and third Sunday. 11:30 a.m.; meet at the factory gates, 610 E. 111th St. (Wear comfortable shoes and weather-appropriate clothing)

ctc-ent-events@tribune.com.



CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY

"Springtime Flowers," 2007, by Fred Moss is part of the exhibit.

PICK OF THE WEEK HAROLD WASHINGTON LIBRARY

The weather changes swiftly in Chicago, but Fred Moss has on display a permanent memory of spring and summer: "Impressions of Chicago Gardens: Oil Paintings by Fred Moss." The local artist, who was influenced by the master painters at an early age, highlights some of the area's finest gardens in his work, including the Garfield Park Conservatory and Chicago Botanic Garden. *Through Sept. 5, Harold Washington Library, 400 S. State St.; 312-747-4300, chipublib.org*

Pick your path

Botanic, from Page 1

from the very trees all around me. Ink on paper cannot do the noise justice. "Clang?" "CLANG?" "CLANG-CLANG-CLANG!" Like that, but more loud, more capital.

Though partly hidden by leaves and branches, the island's carillon tower is right next door to the hilltop, and the time, wouldn't you know, was exactly 4 o'clock. The carillon wanted to let everyone in the garden know this chronological fact, but it seemed to want to let me in particular know. (A carillon, for the unfamiliar, is essentially a tower full of bells selected for qualities, including volume.)

I jumped a little. I laughed a little, because the timing really was absurd. And, of course, as I gathered my breath afterward, the only phone call I received all day came in.

But interrupted peacefulness is atypical at the Chicago Botanic Garden. Usually, you'll have to pinch yourself once or twice in the course of a visit to keep from blissing out entirely. This is one pretty, pretty place, boasting what my notes from the day refer to as an "in-your-face serenity."

My scribbles also included the phrase "preternaturally pretty," and I think it's a fair one. Beyond mere nature, this is botany as an upper-class matron, done up with all of the perfection, all of the styling and makeup and grooming that time, money and taste can create. Here, even the parking lots are lovely.

To be sure, at the Chicago Botanic Garden you can just walk in the woods on paths in the northeast section of the property. That's nice, cooling and calming, a welcome respite from the urban or suburban environments most of us inhabit. But the showplaces are the almost three-fourths of the grounds that are cultivated, and each garden you visit is more impressive, or differently impressive, than the next. Each becomes, temporarily, your favorite.

The Model Railroad Garden runs 16 working vintage model trains through a tableau of extreme plant-tending surrounding occasionally kitschy replicas of American landmarks (especially Frank Lloyd Wright homes). It is bizarre and effective, surprisingly extensive and well worth the separate admission charge (\$6 for adults).

The Rose Garden surrounds an expansive lawn with scores of varieties of the superstar flower. That's right next to the English Walled Garden, which contains examples of several styles of walled horticulture from the old country.

A Heritage Garden pays homage to Renaissance-era gardens in Italy; it's a little close to the main visitor center to be fully, or at least relaxedly, appreciated.

There's a Waterfall Garden featuring what you'd expect, plus ducks that visitors have trained, unintentionally, to hang around begging for food. The Enabling Garden shows garden

designs that can work for people with disabilities, while, just behind it, the Sensory Garden displays plants that speak especially loudly to the senses.

None of these gardens — there are 26 — is a postage stamp, by the way. They've all got breadth and ambition and moments of absolute charm.

But my first favorite was the Landscape Garden, intended to show us what can be achieved at home (with, the signage doesn't bother to add, the services of a top-tier landscape architect and a team of weed-pulling minions who stop by three or four times a week). It is a pipe-dream kind of place for a person of my budget priorities, but what a beautiful pipe and what a beautiful dream.

But then my favorite became Evening Island, less cultivated looking despite being a showcase for "the New American Garden Style of landscape design." It's 5 acres, and it's south of the main area, so there is room to roam and think (and to have carillon bells thunder in your ear).

That, of course, was soon supplanted by the Japanese Garden, two islands to the east that at once feel the most formal and the most artistic on the property. There are peaceful, quiet corners to sit and talk intimately, as well as pebble-covered gardens that are only for looking. The sign there explained that the Japanese gardening style presents an "abstract and idealized" version of nature, but, of course, that's true of the Chicago Botanic Garden as a whole as well.

The garden is a monument to pathways. Whether of brick, gravel, stone or grass, they snake everywhere on the grounds. In a day spent amid them, you are reminded of how alluring to humans any path can be. Seeing one, it's hard to just walk the other way.

But despite existing primarily on a series of islands in a sort of lake or lagoon system, the garden could take better advantage of its waterways. A pricey annual Father's Day canoe ride sells out, but there are no regular boat rides to show off a fresh new perspective on the plantings.

The garden says it wants to keep things quiet, rather than having voices travel across water. But this seems a questionable concern in a place where voices on land often surround you. And wouldn't it be nice to see the Lakeside Gardens, for instance, from the lake, rather than from the opposite shore?

Created on Cook County Forest Preserve District land, the garden was opened to the public in 1972, making it one of the babies among the Chicago area's museums, zoos and nature parks.

But it has grown up and out quickly, in the manner of a well-tended garden. The garden surpassed 1 million visitors last year for the first time, a culmination of five straight years of attendance growth.

More than just a place to display what green thumbs can



A butterfly lands on Felix Linder, 4, of Evanston, at the butterfly exhibit. The garden's plants include Blazing Star, below.



Chicago Botanic Garden

When: 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. through Sept. 1

Where: 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe

Tickets: \$25 per car; 847-835-5440 or chicagobotanic.org

do, it is a working research center, employing some 200 scientists, graduate students and interns in botanical science; a few dozen of them are from a joint graduate program in plant biology and conservation with Northwestern University.

Much of the research happens in the Plant Conservation Science Center, opened in 2009 and accessible to visitors. Also vital to the mission are some 2,000 volunteers, whether helping to answer gardening questions from the public, separating seeds in the science building or tending to, say, the annual garden.

This is not a campus at rest. Construction starts in the fall on an ambitious new project, the north end Learning Campus, which will include kids gardens and classroom space. A more current bit of construction news involves biking, a key part of the garden's DNA.

Whenever I visit, I try to ride, time depending, for at least 10 of the 17 miles leading to it on the Cook County Forest Preserve's first-rate North Branch Trail. A new connector on garden property, hooking up that trail with the Green Bay Trail to the north, will open in September. Given the general friendliness to two-wheeled, nonmotorized vehicles, it would be nice if bikers were allowed to ride more freely within park environs.

The food in the visitor center cafeteria is pretty good, although the seating, built out on a deck over water, gets crowded and, on the busy day I was most recently there, staff needed to do a better job picking up abandoned trays and emptying recycling and garbage bins before they filled up.

If you let yourself think about it, you can hear the whir of

traffic from an adjacent highway (Interstate Highway 94), like at the Morton Arboretum (with I-88) to the west of Chicago.

But these are quibbles with a place that is entrancing in the big picture and in most of the small ones. It defies you to take a bad picture or, really, to leave your camera in your pocket.

It shares its bounty with you. You can often buy plants to take home, or vegetables at the farmers markets (first and third Sundays, through Oct. 19).

And for all of its size and scope, small, human touches abound. One of the best is the series of little chalkboard signs mounted in gardens throughout the facility.

Other institutions these days try to make their signs dynamic and easily changeable by using iPads. These mini chalkboards were far more effective and far more personable (although perhaps less appealing to small children, but the world already caters plenty to them).

As I walked through, I began to feel like I was in conversation with the signs' author, who was serving as the best kind of tour guide: there when I wanted her, but entirely willing to be ignored when I didn't.

Those signs, I learned, are the work of one person, Karen Zaworski, whose title at the garden is interpretive writer. From her I learned about victory gardens, the "hard pruning" of the stag-horn sumac, the wisdom of planting hostas in your shady areas, an upcoming heirloom tomato weekend (Saturday and Sunday) and how many miles the Model Railroad Garden trains travel in a year (24,000).

If a surprise carillon bell is one kind of stimulus, Zaworski's modest but informative messages were exactly the other.

Don't miss: The Trellis Bridge, letting you walk onto Evening Island from the east, near the Science Center, is a beautiful, softly curving structure. And the big restored prairie and meadow on the south end of the park are among the least-visited areas and, therefore, perhaps the most worthy of a long, contemplative stroll.

Don't bother: There's a lot going on in the central Regenstein Center, including a busy library, a sort of conservatory and a new orchid show in the late winter and spring. But it's indoors, and parts of the building are drab. If you are on a time budget, spend it elsewhere.

Pro tips: By all means arrive on foot or by bike, if you can pull it off. The garden, in one of my favorite policies by any Chicago-area institution, lets people who come in that way enter for free, charging only car entrants. Visit the Green Roof Garden atop the Plant Science Center, an example of what can be done in unlikely spaces.

Take advantage of the bevy of summer evening programming (details at chicagobotanic.org). And the Garden Guide app, for iOS and Android, is pretty nifty, but you could be forgiven for wanting to ignore your mobile phone here.

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