

# Denver Botanic Gardens is No. 1 in attendance

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Associated Press

DENVER — Denver Botanic Gardens had more visitors last year than any other public garden in North America, edging out the Washington, D.C., attraction that usually tops the list.

Denver gardens CEO Brian Vogt credited a popular show by contemporary glass artist Dale Chihuly and the opening of a science exhibit. He has also seen increasing response to projects to help Denver's urban residents grow and find fresh food.

Those elements and good weather resulted in more than 1.4 million visitors, substantially up from the record of 879,000 set in 2013, Vogt said. The Directors of Large Gardens top 10 list released this month put the U.S. Botanic Garden second with nearly 1.3 million visitors and Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pa., third, with just over 1.1 million.

The Chicago Botanic Garden ranked fourth, while the Morton Arboretum finished in seventh place.

Devin Dotson, spokesman for the U.S. Botanic Garden, said that with its prime location near the Capitol, his garden is accustomed to being at the



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With 1.4 million visitors, Denver Botanic Gardens, above, displaced the U.S. Botanic Garden in Washington.

top of the list with around 1.3 million visitors each year. But he wasn't resentful at losing out last year to Denver, which he visited himself to see the Chihuly.

"That was awesome," he said.

In Pennsylvania, Longwood Gardens executive director Paul Redman, like Vogt in Denver, cited good weather and imaginative programming for his attendance figures. Redman, who said his visitor numbers have been increasing

steadily for the past half dozen years, also said people in the 20- to-48-year-old age group were connecting with the mission of his and similar gardens because "they are so in tune right now to anything green: the environment, being outdoors."

Abby Spencer, director of marketing and outreach for the American Public Gardens Association, is seeing a trend of gardens combining traditional horticultural attractions with art shows,

concerts and hands-on science exhibitions.

"People are coming more and more to public gardens," she said, adding that such gardens nationally average an annual 75 million visitors.

In Denver, Vogt said his institution's marked increase in visitors was not overwhelming thanks to help from 2,700 volunteers and seasonal jobs that boosted his usual staff of about 175 by 30 during the summer.

The theft last summer of four glass pieces by Chihuly raised security concerns, but Vogt said they were not linked to the big crowds. Police say the thieves weren't professionals, but people who broke into the grounds after hours out of boredom and didn't even realize the small pieces were worth thousands of dollars. One of the stolen pieces was recovered by police, but three were destroyed, apparently accidentally.

## Public gardens flourishing

The country's top public gardens ranked by visitors in 2014:

1. Denver Botanic, 1,415,670
2. U.S. Botanic, 1,291,429
3. Longwood, Kennett Square, Pa., 1,175,572
4. Chicago Botanic, 1,058,000
5. Missouri, St. Louis, 1,045,969
6. Dallas, 978,468
7. Morton Arboretum, 932,500
8. New York, 900,000
9. Desert Botanical, Phoenix, 810,000
10. Brooklyn, 807,000

Vogt described 2014 as "a bit of an aberration," but he still expected to welcome around 1 million visitors this year.

"We can absolutely handle it," he said, saying the gardens were committed to continuing to attract a diverse audience.

The science exhibit housed in a sharply angled contemporary building explores such concerns as drought. "The environment's on everyone's mind," Vogt said.