



Great Garden Escapes

Alberta's public gardens are hidden treasures just waiting to be explored

STORY BY *Debbie Olsen*

Wandering through an enchanted garden and discovering a special shade of green that was long buried under a blanket of winter snow is one of the great pleasures of our short summer season. And while you can derive a great deal of satisfaction from digging in your own backyard, a visit to one of Alberta's public gardens is an opportunity to be both inspired and to learn a thing or two. Many public Alberta gardens are dedicated to both horticultural research and public education – cataloguing diverse collections, conserving rare species and even discovering new varieties of plants. They are also unique expressions of art, nature, and culture that provide an oasis of escape and rejuvenation for visitors.

Alberta has a vast array of public gardens – from multicultural gardens like the Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden in Lethbridge, which celebrates the contributions of Japanese immigrants to Alberta's culture to the Cascade Gardens in Banff, with its flagstone pathways, tumbling waterfalls and colourful plantings. The largest rose garden in northern Alberta can be found at St. Albert's Botanic Park, while a visit to a traditional Danish garden is no further than the Danish Museum and Gardens near Spruce View.

"We have some amazing gardens that are hidden treasures right in our own backyard," says Donna Dawson, an Alberta gardening author

and master gardener. "Not long ago, I popped in to see the Ellis Bird Farm near Lacombe and it was such a surprise. The gardens are a truly incredible mix of natural area, garden and wildlife preserve. There is also a teashop onsite that serves the best scones I have ever tasted. And it's just one example of the kinds of special places that make up Alberta's public gardens."

Perhaps the most famous public gardens in the province is the University of Alberta's Devonian Botanic Garden near Devon. These enormous gardens have garnered worldwide attention as the most northerly botanic gardens in Canada. They extend over 80 acres with 110 acres of additional natural space. "This garden is a real pleasure to visit in any season," says Dawson. "When it's secluded and quiet, I like to look for unique plant species in this diverse garden. One day I discovered a rather large stand of Himalayan Blue Poppies hidden underneath some spruce trees. These are incredibly difficult plants to grow in our climate and this was a particularly stunning stand, so I knew I had found something special."

Like the Nikka Yuko and Danish Gardens, the gardens at the Ukrainian Village just east of Edmonton showcase the province's cultural diversity. "We provide an authentic experience for our visitors and our gardens are historically

accurate right down to the use of heritage plants and seeds. It allows visitors to become time travelers and see what life was like for the early pioneers," says Arnold Grant, head of community and corporate relations at the Ukrainian Village, a national Communities in Bloom winner for 2004.

Visiting one of Alberta's many botanical gardens can help to improve your horticultural knowledge and abilities by allowing you to observe different garden designs and learn about the growth requirements of plants in our northern climate. The Dorothy Harvie Gardens at the Calgary Zoo, for instance, showcase a surprising variety of hardy plants that can be grown in a harsh climate.

The Muttart Conservatory in Edmonton, with its distinctive four-pyramid structure, houses 700 species of plants in indoor controlled climates – many of which you won't be able to find anywhere else in the province. All plants are labelled, so it's easy to identify different species. The Muttart is one of the many gardens across the province that also offers a variety of classes on topics such as gardening techniques, plant species recognition and horticulture.

So whether you're after a simple escape or something a little more educational, you're sure to find it with a stroll through some of the province's public gardens. **f**



University of Alberta Devonian Botanic Garden

New This Summer

- **Dorothy Harvie Gardens at the Calgary Zoo:** This year marks the 20th anniversary of these botanical gardens; special anniversary events are planned.
- **Ellis Bird Farm:** This unique garden near Lacombe is introducing new nature-scape gardens, expanding the xeriscape gardens, conducting wildflower seed trials and offering new workshops and day camps this summer.
- **Ukrainian Village:** This national Communities in Bloom winning site will be offering new special historic garden tours this summer.
- **University of Alberta Devonian Botanic Garden:** The Devonian Gardens have been busy renovating the tropical butterfly houses and bringing in new butterflies, moving the cactus and succulent house to another area, adding a new bromeliad collection, and adding new plants to the Plants and People Show House. Many new courses and programs will be offered this season.

Garden Makeover

Here are a few tips to help spruce up a stale garden:

- A garden is a personal space that is less about plants and more about artistic expression. Try adding at least one new plant or growing technique each season to your garden and it will slowly become an extension of yourself.
- Strategically placed container gardens can quickly spruce up a patio, deck, or garden area by adding a splash of colour to the landscape.
- Add some bright seasonal annual plants to fill in the holes in a dull garden space. Flowering annuals are also great additions to garden borders and walkways.
- Companion planting can be used to brighten up a vegetable garden and also to repel insects. Planting marigolds in your vegetable garden adds colour and may increase insect resistance.
- Accessories can add whimsy to your garden space. Small plaques, statuettes, and other colourful accessories also have the advantage of being movable.
- If your garden is not growing well, look for ways to improve your soil (compost, fertilizers) or prevent weed growth and retain moisture (mulch) or control insects and pests if present.

