

Flower power

Catch nature's blooming beauty in stunning gardens

By Lisa A. Beach

FROM THE GLOW OF yellow buttercups right after winter's last frost to the lush purple stalks of aromatic lavender that can bloom until autumn, peak flower seasons offer an array of eye candy.

Traveling plant lovers who want to leave the deadheading and weed pulling behind can marvel at nature's flowering wonders with a visit to any of the American Horticultural Society's (AHS) more than 345 partner gardens across the country.

"We can help you identify many gardens in the Northeast," says Su-

san Friedman, director of marketing and communications at AHS, which celebrated its 100th anniversary last year.

One garden Friedman knows well sits on the grounds of River Farm in Alexandria, Va. River Farm has been AHS headquarters for 50 years, but more than 250 years prior, in 1760, future President George Washington purchased the grounds and surrounding land — 1,800 acres — and named it River Farm, the northernmost site of his original five farms.

With picturesque vistas overlooking the Potomac River, the current 25-acre property highlights formal and naturalistic gardens, including woodlands, a meadow, an award-

winning children's garden and 16,000 tulips in bloom every spring. On-site, marvel at the White House Gates, initially installed at the White House in 1819.

River Farm does not house botanical gardens — only those sites with documented, detailed displays describing the plants for scientific research or public education get that label — but, there are many across the Northeast.

Whether they are sprawling horticultural wonders or historic homestead gardens, no two flower-powered properties are alike, but all boast beautiful blooms to enjoy. Check out these gardens, many which open for the season in May:



TORY PAXSON/COASTAL MAINE BOTANICAL GARDENS

COASTAL MAINE BOTANICAL GARDENS

Boothbay, Maine

As the largest public garden in New England, this 325-acre property offers 2 miles of hiking trails, 19 acres of ornamental and themed gardens, saltwater frontage, and children's and sensory gardens. Relax at the Native Butterfly and Moth House and discover the Guardians of the Seeds — five giant trolls created by Danish artist Thomas Dambo from reclaimed wood — to creatively showcase the secrets of the state's forest ecology. "A true Maine experience, the gardens (are) committed to connecting people to nature, preserving the biodiversity of the Maine coast, and continuing to be an accessible, welcoming place," says Jen McKane, the garden's vice president of philanthropy and marketing.



Coastal Maine
Botanical Gardens



MONIQUE CARABALLO

ITHACA CHILDREN'S GARDEN
Ithaca, N.Y.

Free and open to the public daily, this award-winning children's garden offers 3 acres of kid-friendly spaces to explore. Visit the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone, where children are encouraged to dig and otherwise interact with nature. Play on the landmark feature, Gaia the Turtle. Take a sensory journey to taste, see, smell, touch and hear all that grows in and inhabits the Kitchen Garden. Check out one of the signature events — International Mud Day Celebration (June 24) — to honor what staff call "all things mudtastic."



ROBERT MUNGER

BEDROCK GARDENS
Lee, N.H.

This unique oasis of art, horticulture and inspiration is situated on the grounds of an 18th-century New England farm. Designed as a journey through landscape rooms and open spaces, this 30-acre property boasts sculptures, rare botanicals, a spiral garden, the 200-foot-long Wiggle Waggle stream, wildlife pond and an elegant Japanese teahouse. "Each season sings a different tune, from the earliest spring ephemerals blooming to raucous summer flowers to enchanting fall color," Executive Director John Forti says.



FRIENDS OF MORRILL HOMESTEAD

THE MORRILL HOMESTEAD GARDENS & GROUNDS
Stafford, Vt.

History buffs will love this 1840s homestead property, a blend of Gothic Revival architecture with formal-yet-picturesque Romantic Landscape Movement gardens. Stroll the serpentine walkways while gazing at arabesque beds bursting with colorful annuals and historic specimen trees. Peruse the kitchen garden filled with perennials, roses, herbs, fruit trees and vegetables. Get an up-close look at 19th-century rural living, complete with barns, an icehouse, corn crib and blacksmith shop.



BERKSHIRE BOTANICAL GARDEN
Stockbridge, Mass.

One of the Northeast’s older public display gardens, this 24-acre property showcases more than 3,000 species and varieties of herbaceous and woody plants in the display gardens. Explore the serene pond garden, stroll along the iconic daylily walk, check out the historic 1937 herb garden and pop into the Martha Stewart Cottage Garden, which has a shed boasting a living sedum roof. Don’t miss Lucy’s Garden, billed as a whimsical topiary collection of nearly two dozen exotic living sculptures.



BERKSHIRE BOTANICAL GARDEN



SCOTT GOLDSMITH

PITTSBURGH BOTANIC GARDEN
Pittsburgh

This 65-acre park showcases seven display gardens, including the native landscape of the Allegheny Plateau ecoregion, flowering dogwoods and the buzzing Hillside Pollinator Garden. “Once actively mined to extract coal, the garden’s ongoing conservation and restoration efforts gave the site a second chance,” says Keith Kaiser, the organization’s executive director. From community events, such as tai chi in the garden or acupuncture every other Saturday, to the botany walk-and-talk sessions with plant-based lunch included, the property bursts with reasons to visit year-round. There’s even an adventure backpack available for children. It’s loaded with information cards and binoculars or a magnifying glass to help them identify plants and animals.