

NEWS

Deck the gardens - New England Botanic Garden puts on the lights



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Telegram & Gazette

Published 5:02 a.m. ET Nov. 23, 2022 | Updated 7:18 a.m. ET Nov. 23, 2022

BOYLSTON — To say fall is a busy time at the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill would be an understatement.

The horticulture department had over 100,000 gardening bulbs to plant between mid-October and early November if they were to bloom in time for the facility's spring flower displays. While this was no small task, these weren't the only kind of bulbs — or even the most numerous — being placed around the garden.

“We've been planting bulbs in the ground while suspending bulbs in the trees,” said Horticulture Director Mark Richardson, referring to the preparation for garden's annual Night Lights display, featuring over half a million lights arranged in themes throughout the grounds.

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Night Lights runs from Friday to Dec. 31, but “planning is almost a year-round endeavor,” said Richardson. January is spent taking down the exhibit, followed by debriefing meetings discussing what worked and what didn't, with plans for the next display beginning in February and March.

A small, core group brainstorms throughout the year, but installation season, from October to November, is all hands on deck, Richardson explained.

“The whole entire horticulture department,” he said, “everyone plays a role from planning and designing to installing and fabricating.”

The biggest challenge is making it a little bit different every year, he said, to ensure that returning visitors who have made Night Lights a family tradition will get a new experience

each time.

This year, different areas of the garden will have their own nature theme including ocean, mountain, icescape, lava and meadow. Not even the café will be left out – it will have a storm theme with clouds suspended from the ceiling, threaded through with blue lights for lightning.

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Horticulture Director Mark Richardson, New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill

The garden has always done a holiday display, but in the last three to four years it has “ramped up outdoor lighting,” said Richardson. The garden's new leadership has focused on events-based promotion and new additions to the garden such as the Rambles – a large boardwalk area in the north of the property, which opened this past spring – have presented more display opportunities.

Dawn Davies, formal gardens manager at Tower Hill, has worked on the seasonal display every year for 24 years and has seen the event evolve over those two decades.

“It runs like a well-oiled machine by now,” she said. “We know how long everything takes, how many people it takes and we have a great group of volunteers who have been helping us quite a bit.”

Thursday morning, Davies was working on the rainbow tunnel – a corridor of metal frames decorated in multicolored lights – which has been a fan favorite for the last few years. Structures such as this are among the more challenging pieces of the event and would not be possible without the skills of the garden's land steward and landscape gardener, Richardson said.

“For the most part we're lighting existing trees and shrubs in the collection,” he said, “but a feature like that, we need to build it from scratch.”

This year the rainbow tunnel is bigger than ever – about 100 feet long with brand new frames and lights.

One change that visitors noticed when the event returned in 2021 from a one-year COVID hiatus was a decided lack of overt holiday décor. Richardson said it was a conscious decision to keep the Night Light event secular.

“We want to make sure everyone feels welcome,” he said.

While some visitors did question the lack of Christmas trees, the Yuletide does not have a monopoly on seasonal festivities and the organizers wanted Night Lights to reflect that.

“A lot of cultures have celebrations this time of year and we wanted this to be for everyone,” said Richardson. “As the days get shorter, people are desperate for a little light.”

Tickets are now on sale at nebg.org/nightlights.