

COUNTRY GAZETTE

New England Botanic Garden's children's garden The Ramble brings Narnia, Neverland to mind

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Amidst the forests and open spaces of Boylston, there lies a new enchanted garden, where the gifts of the natural world are abundant — trees unfurling green leaves, flowers beckoning bees, water purling over rocks and flowing in a brook, quiet and shaded spots inviting exploration.

It's all part of the newly opened children's garden — whimsically called "The Ramble" — at the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill, and it's a place designed to encourage kids to disconnect in order to connect with the natural world.

Among its highlights is a forage garden filled with edible plants, a landscaped pond and waterfall to explore, and a "stumpery," where visitors can climb and explore among tree stumps and experience an imagination-inspiring tunnel crafted from woven branches and other natural materials.

"A need for a joyful and natural educational experience for children and families inspired the design and creation of The Ramble," said CEO Grace Elton.

The vision, she said, "is to inspire the next generation of nature lovers, gardeners, and horticulturists through an inviting and accessible garden" — to build connections between plants and children that also inspires wonder and understanding of the importance of the natural world.

The 1.5-acre, fully-accessible and immersive garden — set in the heart of NEGB's 171-acre property — was created by W. Gary Smith, an internationally-renowned landscape architect and artist, and designed by the landscape architecture and planning firm Ryan Associates of Waltham.

The Ramble, said Elton, "has hundreds of plants, including beautiful perennials, bulbs, shrubs, and trees, and many of them are native to New England."

"There are small trees like Persian ironwood, fringe tree, and Carolina silverbell; shrubs like Japanese witch hazel, witherod, yakushimanum rhododendron; several perennials like creeping phlox, Bradbury's beebalm, red baneberry, and foamflower; ferns like maidenhair fern and cinnamon fern; and ornamental grasses," she said.

You can take a Ramble in a place of wonder

The project, which brings to mind the magical qualities of The Secret Garden, and other imaginative places like Narnia, Neverland, and Pooh Corner, has been on the drawing table for a number of years. Elton said the actual construction took about two years.

Other elements of The Ramble, besides those mentioned above, include a circle lawn for games, picnics, performances, classes, and programs; a pavilion for outdoor classes and picnic tables for gathering, an outcrop amphitheater for students to gather while on STEAM-focused field trips, accessible paths for people of all abilities, and numerous quiet spots for reading, drawing, reflecting, and inspiration.

A ribbon-cutting for The Ramble took place in late April, and it officially opened May 14.

"I feel fortunate that the dream that the board, staff, members, supporters, and visitors had many years ago has become a reality under my leadership. We have long been cherished as a beautiful place, an educational and horticultural resource, and a place for recreation and rejuvenation," Elton said. "Now it is time to extend those opportunities to the younger audience through The Ramble."

Over the course of the opening weekend — which included live music, story time, a magic show, pony rides, lawn games, imaginative play stations and a beer garden for the adults — more than 1,500 visitors came to experience the new garden.

"We had several happy visitors and received many exciting and positive comments about The Ramble," Elton said, noting one parent told Visitors Services they appreciated New England Botanic Garden and The Ramble "because it's the only place her kids genuinely enjoy...they would pick a visit to the garden over their 'devices' any day."

That is music to the ears of people like Elton, who have been dreaming for so long about making The Ramble happen.

"I hope it will inspire children and families to become passionate stewards of the environment. We designed this experience with our adult minds, but we have already seen that children will make it their own," she said. "During opening weekend, we overheard one little boy exclaiming 'I'm going into my man cave!' when he entered the brush pile tunnel and children who were dressed up with fairy wings made the central lawn their special fairy village."

The outcome is also pleasing to The Ramble's creator, who also sees it as a magical place where visitors can uncover the wonders of nature.

"A garden is where people can find the deepest connections with the living world, and children's Gardens really inspire imagination," Smith said.

It's difficult to choose a favorite spot in The Ramble

Elton said it is difficult to choose which part of The Ramble is her top favorite, but one contender is the "stumpery," with its tree stumps for climbing and its tunnel made of brush, but "The Ramble also has a beautiful waterfall and pond, a naturalistic amphitheater made of large boulders, and a stone stacking area that I love," she said.

The plan is to use the garden to engage children in STEAM principles (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math), "and teach them about the value of plants in our ecosystem," Elton said.

"We plan to have several classes, drop-in activities, and exploration stations in The Ramble, which will be geared to learning through hands-on investigations, imaginative play, and outdoor exploration," she said. "The space will be a learning environment for families as well as school groups on field trips."

If you go

LOCATION: 11 French Drive, Boylston.

HOURS: Open daily, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Last admission time is 4 p.m. Closed on Thanksgiving, Dec. 24, Dec. 25, Dec. 31, and Jan. 1. For the safety of guests, NEGG may close due to severe weather.

ADMISSION: Free for members. Otherwise, adults \$18, seniors (65+) \$15, child (age 4-12) \$8, child (age 3 and under) free, dogs \$7.

It is recommended to buy tickets online in advance to secure a preferred date. You can also buy tickets in person at the garden.

WEBSITE: nebg.org/

FACEBOOK: facebook.com/NewEnglandBG

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