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West Boylston botanic garden presenting 'Autumn Illuminated' followed by 'Night Lights'

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BOYLSTON — Depending on the season, the light can change at Tower Hill Botanic Garden.

We're not just talking about the way the spring or summer sunlight can play on and dazzle the 171 acres of woodland trails and formal gardens along with a view of Wachusett Reservoir, or the manner in which the shadows of fall and winter can suddenly shoal the grounds into darkness as the sun sets increasingly early.

Tower Hill, operated by the nonprofit Worcester County Horticultural Society, can also set up its own lights to create changing perceptions and encounters.

Last year, Tower Hill created a new lighted experience with a lighted path through the gardens to highlight fall colors and provide a special after-dark walk through the heart of Tower Hill.

"Autumn Illuminated" proved to be a success, selling out all its available spots, said Robert Burgess, senior communications manager at Tower Hill.

The event returns for 2021 from 6 to 9 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays, Sept. 30 to Oct. 31.

Tickets selling fast

But act quickly, because as of last Tuesday, Burgess said 75% of the tickets for "Autumn Illuminated" had already been sold, with no promise there would be any left by the time you read this story.

The reasons for the appeal of "Autumn Illuminated" do not require any smoke or mirrors to figure out.

"In the fall, after hours, with all the lights glowing, it's a really magical destination," Burgess said.

The path people follow is about half-mile.

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"Last year we added something for people to enjoy in the fall and it went really well. There seems to be a high interest in people wanting to explore nature and get outside in a place like Tower Hill and connect with friends and family in a safe space," he said.

"Autumn Illuminated" brought 14,000 visitors to Tower Hill last year (a similar number is expected this year)

That meant the organization was able to connect with 14,000 people and get support.

"It's been a challenging 18 months," Burgess said of Tower Hill weathering the pandemic. "Autumn Illuminated' is one way we can make ends meet. It's really encouraging when people support a new event and support what we have to offer."

Pandemic problems

Tower Hill was closed to the public from March 16 to June 8, 2020, because of the stay-at-home guidelines issued by the state regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

It slowly reopened in June 2020 for people to enjoy activities such as exploring its trails, subject to certain restrictions because of COVID-19, including the introduction of timed ticketing and capacity limitations.

However, in May last year, Tower Hill had decided to cancel its popular "Night Lights" for 2020. "Night Lights" has been annually welcoming 40,000+ visitors from the day after Thanksgiving to the end of December and was and continues to be Tower Hill's largest fundraiser of the year.

But more good news as that "Night Lights" is returning this year, Burgess said.

"We're so excited it's coming back this year," he said. "We're expecting a really successful year."

"Night Lights" will be back in its usual calendar slot from the day after Thanksgiving through the end of December. Tickets for Tower Hill members are expected to go on sale Oct. 18, with tickets for non-members available about a week later.

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"Night Lights" has featured thousands of lights painstakingly wrapped around trees and threaded through the shrubbery along the botanic garden's many pathways and its exotic-plant bedecked conservatories. Some 15 acres of formal gardens and surrounding woodlands have been dressed up in colorful, glittering lights for the event.

The event has to be carefully planned months in advance, and in May 2020, organizers could not see how it could go ahead.

This year there are opportunities for people to come to "Autumn Illuminated" and "Night Life." Enjoy one, or both.

The differences between the two are to do with scale, and light — not night and day.

"'Night Lights' is a really festive occasion with lots of activity and lots of people," Burgess said. "'Autumn Illuminated' is a little more laid back. A lot of people are looking for a quiet evening stroll. A lot of people have been on too many Zoom meetings. It's a quiet evening. Just get a break for a while."

'Jaw-dropping experience'

With "Night Lights," "We're shooting for people to have a jaw-dropping experience," Burgess said.

"'Autumn Illuminated' is more simple, reflective. You get a sense of calmness. There are more autumnal, different hues in that color range."

In contrast to the 14,000 tickets for "Autumn Illuminated," "Night Lights" will have more than 46,000 tickets available this year.

Meanwhile, 2021 has been going well at Tower Hill. "There's always something going on," Burgess said.

Tower Hill also has a Visitors Center for indoors activities.

There have been flower shows on several recent weekends, and other upcoming events include the American Craft Fair at Tower Hill Botanic Garden, a juried craft show in collaboration with the Worcester Center for Crafts that runs Oct. 23 and 24. The show will

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Outdoor exhibitions have included *Wild Hideaways: Designed for Adventure*, running through Sept. 30. The exhibition features larger than life pieces guests can explore that were created by artists and landscape architects inspired by nature.

"Wicked Wings," Sept. 11 to Oct. 31, is an interactive exhibition of sculptures depicting the wings of enchanting creatures both real and imagined. The works are located throughout the gardens, and people can explore, "strike a wicked pose," and photograph themselves and loved ones transformed into winged beings. "Wicked Wings" was designed and fabricated by the staff at Tower Hill.

Tower Hill is open daily year round. All members and guests must reserve a ticket online before visiting. Timed ticketing is still in place to help with the flow of visitors. There is an indoor mask requirement, with exceptions for medical conditions and young children. There is no vaccination requirement at this time, Burgess said.

Outdoors, "People decide if they want to wear a mask or not," he said.

With that, Tower Hill is "doing everything we can to meet the most stringent standards of safety," Burgess said.

"People need a safe place where they can get out and connect, and Tower Hill can serve as that place for a lot of people. We've become known as a safe place to gather."

Tickets for "Autumn Illuminated" are: nonmembers - \$18, adult; \$13, seniors; \$8, youth 6 to 18; free, children 5 and under. Members - \$10.80, adult; seniors, \$7.80; youth 6 to 18, \$4.80; free, children 5 and under. For more information and to reserve tickets, visit towerhillbg.org.