

THE ITEM

Tower Hill Botanic Garden still growing strong after 35 years in Boylston

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BOYLSTON – Tower Hill is showing the signs of growth, with construction equipment moving dirt.

For 35 years the growth has been constant, from nurtured plants to new displays and programs.

Since it opened in 1986, the hilltop farm has been home to the Worcester County Horticultural Society, which since 1842 had been a downtown Worcester institution.

But under the leadership of John Trexler, the Society grew beyond the city borders, and in doing so attracted a whole new audience.

Part of that may have had to do with the expansive new site, which offered the foundation for the Society to show off its treasured plants and the skills of members and employees.

And the guests gained plenty of room to wander and admire the many plants, from fields of yellow daffodils to an orangerie filled with a menagerie of more exotic plants that don't quite find New England weather hospitable.

There are 171 acres on the Tower Hill Farm property, which was purchased from the Carter family. The 1700s farmhouse is now part of the complex, a reminder, along with old stone walls, of an earlier use for the property. Named Tower Hill since it was used as a surveying point when the Wachusett Reservoir was built, the former dairy farm has retained views of the reservoir and nearby Mount Wachusett, seen over fields and gardens.

About 15 acres have been developed for the formal garden portion, with trails wandering through much of the woodlands, where stone walls are testimony to the former farmland. "It is distinctly New England," Robert Burgess said.

As plants come to life, Burgess said, "We are making the best use of the property."

With spring, the ground is being prepared. Vegetable areas freshly prepared, and employees hand weeding areas where Mother Nature has added in a selection of plants that might conflict with the planned displays.

Burgess has the job of marketing Tower Hill Botanic Gardens.

But it is not hard to extol its virtues.

Surrounded by flowers, shrubs and trees in a wooded former farm, the views are supplemented by scenery that includes Mount Wachusett (with Little Wachusett clearly outlined next to its larger sibling), and a little reservoir down below.

These days, the hills of dirt follow some of the same contours as work continues on expansion. Doubling the size of the parking lot alone is a major undertaking to create more space for the visitors.

Of which there are many.

Tower Hill visits have grown steadily. “Total visitation has grown from 83,073 in 2012 to 150,317 in 2018,” Burgess said.

Some are regulars, like a photographer whose Instagram page features flowers from Tower Hill and who queried Burgess on the status of a favorite bush that seemed to have been cut down. No, Burgess replied, it was cut back, so that it could regrow with better blooms.

During the pandemic, Burgess said, Tower Hill benefited from the support of contributions that allowed the staff to remain. That kept the gardens well maintained. And after a few months of pandemic closure, the gardens offered people an option for outdoor enjoyment.

Being able to reconnect with nature, he said, was one of the benefits.

“We’re really grateful for these last 35 years and all the support we’ve gotten from members, visitors and supporters,” Burgess said. “We’re really excited about the next chapter.”

“It shows how important nature is to the general public,” Burgess said, adding people “discussing that we’re here and taking time out of their busy lives.”

He noted the physical and mental health benefits of being outside.

And the programs offered at Tower Hill don’t stay there. The information, and the appreciation, are carried outside, where people share them. And some of the outreach has expanded Tower Hill’s involvement in area communities.

As much as people were finding “peace and joy,” being outside pre-pandemic, “we found that throughout the pandemic people have this yearning to get outside,” from walks, enjoying the view and taking plenty of photographs.

“For some it’s a place to unplug and unwind,” Burgess said. “Tower Hill is many things to many people.”

Many walk the paths, which have been adjusted to be more friendly for those with mobility issues, and paths meander to allow people to slowly make their way through at their own pace. The ADA-compliance paths also “make it all feel natural and a part of the landscape,” he said.

“The garden areas are never finished,” Burgess said. “It’s always a work in progress.”

One of those is The Ramble, a child-oriented section being developed that will also allow adults to experience a more interactive area.

“A lot of people have worked hard to make Tower Hill what it is today,” Burgess said.

From the founding of the Society in 1842 to creating Tower Hill in 1986, to freshly planted flowers in 2021, the appreciation for nature in its many forms and beauty from flowers to thorns has been a constant.

Since the pandemic, admission has been by reservation only, with the online process also solving one headache: The long lines that sometimes stretched onto French Drive.

The new admission process skips the admission house at the entrance and allows visitors to check in after they have parked.

After that, the grounds become an optical – and sometimes olfactory – delight.

And though Burgess said “Tower Hill is trying to inspire people,” for many it is enough to “just soak it in.”