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COLUMNS

# Worcester County Wonders: Wandering is always welcome at Tower Hill

*Worcester County Wonders: The New England Botanic Garden blooms big*



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BOYLSTON — A large sign reading "Festina Lente," a Latin phrase meaning "to make haste, but slowly," greets visitors at the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. The motto becomes a memorable command as one wanders through more than 200 acres of gardens, trails and pathways, with a view of the Wachusett Reservoir serving as a backdrop for the four-season gardens.

"I just love to design so the whole process of figuring out where to plant what, what works best next to one another, I always try and compliment plants. Take for example here, the edible with the ornamental," formal gardens manager Dawn Davies said as she walked in between rows of blooms, pointing out pineapple sage and sweet potato flowers. Davies has been helping these plants grow for the last 25 years and it's easy to see just how much effort and care she puts into her everyday duties to keep the gardens growing.

The garden is owned and operated by the Worcester County Horticultural Society, which is one of the oldest active horticultural societies in the U.S. Founded in 1842 just three years after the Boston Public Garden, the organization quickly took off, adding weekly exhibitions in the warmer months.

It would be another 144 years before the society would purchase the land the gardens sit on. Before opening Tower Hill's gates in 1986, the society held flower shows, educational programs and helped support thriving gardens in the local community. It was in the mid 1940s that these types of events occurred less and less and the society began planning for gardens of its own.

Flash forward to 2024, the society hasn't just created gardens of its own, but gardens for the public. Considered a "living museum," the grounds are designed for both the flora and fauna that call this place home and the humans who come to experience all they have to offer. Just last year, the garden earned national attention, as it was named "Top Botanic Garden in the U.S." by TravelAwaits.

Despite the honor, the gardens remain somewhat of a hidden gem.

"I grew up in Springfield and I'd never been to the gardens before," Davies said, recalling her first interview. "It was around Thanksgiving, so everything was dormant, but I knew then and there just how special this place is."

Sitting on a blanket in the middle of a small field, Ellen Lucier and Melanie Warner enjoyed dinner sprawled out on the grass. Lucier has been a member for the last five years and said it's more than just a beautiful place.

"I love that there is always something going on," Lucier said. "One time, I was here just relaxing and there were owls with handlers sitting here in this field. It was just such a unique surprise to learn about the birds."

"I came here once for a birthday party for one of the children I babysit," Warner said with a smile. "We hiked the trails, sang camp chants, and caught butterflies with nets."

For Davies, one of the best times of year is actually the winter.

"I absolutely love our holiday lights," she said. "All of the employees take part in stewarding the event so we get to not only experience the display, but we also get to hear the comments from visitors. You hear people who may not have come if not for the lights say things like 'Oh my goodness! Look at that plant, we should come back!'"

From Shinrun-yoku Forest Bathing to yoga in the garden, mixology classes and firefly walks for the youngsters, there is something for everyone in the family. This summer, the gardens are extending their hours on Wednesdays and Thursdays, giving visitors the perfect midweek respite from the brutal summer heat. With live music, a beer garden and the twilight hour at hand, even those who have been to the gardens dozens of times before are set to experience something new.

And what's new at Tower Hill is actually more than 500 years old, as the gardens take on a major botanical project to restore a historic apple orchard dating back to the 1500s. The

apple collection is growing off the main paths of the gardens, and while it isn't exactly eye-catching, its history is palpable. The initial plan for the orchard was created in 2010 but by 2019, fire-blight had consumed most of the trees. Using the remnants of the orchard, apple experts were able to propagate the garden's next generation of trees, which were planted in 2021. Because of this process, it's safe to say heirloom apples grown today should taste identical to those grown some 500 years ago.

The orchard is just one of nearly 20 distinct environments to wander, including a garden of inspiration and an orangerie. There are also a number of unique plants growing within including, a Flame Thrower tree, a Don Redwood tree, oleander, moon carrot and a handful of carnivorous plants. Wandering through the various spaces, each has a unique vibe, offering shade, sun and other elements to help specific species thrive.

"Each space feels like your own world," Davies said as she walked through the Ramble, an area designed for younger visitors to explore. "I mean, there could be 20 people just on the other side of these bushes and you'd never even know it."

Currently on display at Tower Hill, "Flora in Flight," takes the senses to new heights. The large outdoor aerial art installation was created by Colorado-based artist Patrick Shearn and is quite the immersive experience. The exhibit runs through Oct. 31.

A special thank you to Tammy for her suggestion of the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill for this week's edition of Worcester County Wonders.

*T&G engagement editor Sarah Barnacle is getting to know Central Mass. by exploring some of the best places to go and things to do in Worcester County. If you have an idea or suggestion, please email [sbarnacle@gannett.com](mailto:sbarnacle@gannett.com).*

