
GLIMPSES OF MCCRILLIS GARDENS AND BROOKSIDE GARDENS

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This evening I am pleased to have the opportunity to give you a preview of the two gardens you will be visiting tomorrow. Both of these are public parks operated by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) in Montgomery County, MD, and both contain significant collections of azaleas, rhododendrons, and companion plants.

McCRILLIS GARDENS

You will first be visiting this 5-acre property in Bethesda, presented to M-NCPPC by its owners, William and Virginia McCrillis. Mr. McCrillis was Assistant to the Secretary of the Interior under Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower, and he had a particular interest in azaleas and rhododendrons. Beginning in 1941, he amassed on this wooded site an impressive array gleaned from nurseries all across the country. He later expanded his collection to include other rare and unusual plants such as fragrant snowball, Japanese umbrella-pine, several stewartia species and a pair of dawn-redwoods thought to be among the first in private hands.

By the late 1970s Mr. and Mrs. McCrillis began to ponder the future of their garden as their energies diminished. Having no direct descendants, and having seen many examples of larger properties in this wealthy neighborhood being subdivided, they sought a way to preserve their creation while making it available for all to enjoy. Fortunately for local residents and azalea enthusiasts everywhere, they chose to give it as a public park, to be maintained and developed by the staff of Brookside Gardens (itself widely known for its azalea garden).

In the fall of 1978, shortly before Mr. McCrillis died, Brookside gardeners under the leadership of Emile Deckert (who had laid out much of the Brookside azalea garden) began the task of converting a densely planted private garden into one more suited to public visitation. Large masses of old azaleas near the house were thinned, with those removed being transplanted to the undeveloped lower reaches of the property. Paths were widened enough to accommodate large groups of visitors and maintenance equipment, vistas opened, and the tree canopy thinned to admit more light to both old and new plantings. Mr. Deckert devised a traffic pattern to maximize viewing of the large beds, and he designed pleasing color and textural combinations to avoid the visual monotony of solid azalea plantings. A service entrance was opened, and a site was selected for a future maintenance building. New azalea cultivars were added from Brookside, some of which had not yet been named. Evergreens were placed for screening, and more unusual woody plants such as witchhazels and snakebark maples were included.

In the 1980s major physical development of McCrillis Gardens was completed, creating the basic layout you will see on the tour. In 1981 an extensive test planting of over 300 named cultivars of Satsuki azaleas imported from Japan, some for the first time, was installed in a glade-like area near the house. These

were to be observed for hardiness and bloom characteristics with suitable cultivars being distributed to the nursery trade.¹ In 1985, Brian Barr was hired as the first full-time gardener. Maintenance was stabilized, a turf program begun, and more emphasis was placed on refinement of plantings. Several beds were renovated or totally redesigned, and for the first time significant bulb and perennial plantings were added. A large display bed inside the circular driveway was laid out for tulips, to be followed by summer annuals. Extensive plantings of daffodils arranged by classification and flower type (such as miniatures) brought much-needed early spring color and opportunities for interpretation. Perennials such as hostas and astilbes joined the spring wildflowers planted by the McCrillises in adding color and texture when azaleas were out of bloom. Educational programs and guided tours were offered. The lower floor of the house was opened as an art gallery showcasing the works of local artists, and each spring an outdoor sculpture show and open house were held, greatly increasing visitation.

Development and refinement have continued apace in the 1990s. In 1990 Pete Kapust, longtime azalea gardener at Brookside Gardens, came to McCrillis as sole gardener. He immediately began more intensive turf management and bed renovation. Satsukis from the test planting were planted among earlier azaleas to extend the bloom season, the front tulip/annual bed was converted to perennials, and large old azaleas were cut down to rejuvenate them. For the first time structures were added: a gazebo in 1990 and a small wedding/concert pavilion in 1995. These have provided opportunities for visitors to pause and contemplate the gardens more comfortably, with shelter, while adding visual focal points. A gate with a rhododendron motif, custom-designed by local blacksmith/artist Dana Dameron, now welcomes visitors at the front entrance.

Large specimen plants to note during your visit:

Rhododendron reticulatum (rose azalea): Uncommon in Washington-area gardens

Stewartia malacodendron (Virginia stewartia)

Stewartia pseudocamellia (Japanese stewartia)

Rhododendron fortunei (Fortune's rhododendron): Very large masses, demonstrating the heat-tolerance of this seldom-planted species

Rhododendron calendulaceum, *periclymenoides*, *cumberlandense*, (*bakeri*), and *prunifolium*, et al.

Magnolia macrophylla (bigleaf magnolia)

Sciadopitys verticillata (Japanese umbrella-pine)

Metasequoia glyptostroboides (dawn-redwood): Thought to have been planted in 1952. (Sadly, its twin Champion Montgomery County tree at 98 feet; was destroyed by lightning in 1993; the tall stump has been left as a testimonial and can be seen near the gazebo.)

BROOKSIDE GARDENS

After lunch your buses will be whisking you to Wheaton to visit this 35-acre display garden. Opening in 1969, and built on the site of a former nursery, Brookside has as its primary goal the amassing of colorful and instructional displays of plants both in gardens and indoors in two conservatories. Visitor services such as adult and children's programs, guided tours, bus trips, horticultural information, a library, and plant labels are strongly emphasized as part of Brookside's educational mission.

Once you arrive, first stroll through the conservatories. Permanent tropical plantings are combined with ever-changing

seasonal displays in the first conservatory. Favorites with visitors are the cascade chrysanthemum show in November and the Christmas show featuring large poinsettia "trees". The second (smaller) conservatory has no permanent plant collections, allowing greater flexibility in seasonal displays. The early spring show is usually the highlight here; you might even find numerous large azaleas forced into bloom!

As you leave the conservatories, keep in mind that there are three major types of outdoor areas you will see during your visit—formal gardens, informal gardens, and a Japanese-style landscape. Several different gardens can be found in the formal areas. The four large beds of the Trial Garden are filled with masses of tulips or other bulbs in spring. In summer these contain educational displays, the themes of which vary from year to year (for example, plants which attract beneficial insects), and new cultivars of annuals.

Adjacent to the Trial Garden is the Rose Garden. Over 200 cultivars of roses, both modern and old, can be found here. Perennials, ornamental grasses, and evergreens have been extensively interplanted to provide interest when roses are out of bloom. A wisteria-covered arbor drips with long clusters of fragrant lavender flowers in early May and provides welcome shade in summer.

Upon leaving the Rose Garden, you will intersect a long axis comprised of a series of garden "rooms". Closest to the end of the Conservatory is the Perennial Garden, which has a rectangular fountain in the center and is enclosed by a purple granite wall.

This garden was designed in the English "cottage style" by Edith Eddleman of North Carolina in 1989 and features roses, ornamental grasses, and newer cultivars and species of perennials. Its long season of bloom extends from June to frost.

The next "room" is enclosed by a yew hedge and features a display of gray- and silver-foliaged plants accented in summer with white flowers. This was designed for Brookside's 25th (Silver) Anniversary in 1994 and will be continuing as a semi-permanent feature. Height is provided in early summer by the bold silver "branches" of scotch thistle; in fall mums are interspersed where annuals have finished, to be replaced with pockets of bulbs for spring.

As you pass through the yew hedge and ascend a short flight of steps you will find yourself in a semicircular courtyard surrounded by purple plum trees. Under these in spring are thousands of small species bulbs whose bloom cycle has been carefully choreographed to provide waves of color coinciding with the pale pink blooms of the plums. Blue plumbago groundcover emerges later to cover the ripening bulb foliage and provides a show of cobalt-blue flowers in late summer. A raised square fountain adorns the center of this "room," and benches await those seeking the shade of the plums.

Ascend another three steps and you will be facing the Wedding Gazebo. An increasingly popular site for outdoor ceremonies, this structure forms the focal point of the formal garden axis.

Backtrack a bit to the plums and turn right and you will enter the new Fragrance Garden. Dedicated in the fall of 1994, this area contains permanent and seasonal collections of plants with fragrance of flower or foliage. Atop the retaining wall are beds devoted to herbs; as no pesticides are used in this garden visitors are encouraged to touch, taste, and smell. Beneath arbors planted with permanent and summer vines, memorial benches provide welcome relief, as do those in the central gazebo. The sound of twin splashing fountains also soothes during warm months. The central beds contain bulbs in spring and fragrant annuals in

summer augmented with mums in fall. Between the lawn and the arbors is a wide border of mixed plantings of fragrant annuals, perennials and shrubs; sweet scents are particularly noticeable on warm summer evenings.

Up ahead, the rolling hills, sculptured ponds, and Teahouse of the Japanese-style landscape of the Gude Garden beckons you to leave behind the color, complexity, and excitement of the formal gardens. Created in 1973 as a memorial to a prominent local nurseryman, this completely man-made creation was designed by Brookside Gardens' landscape architect Hans Hanses. The ponds contain both Japanese koi and native fish and are fed by groundwater. The Teahouse sits on a man-made island and provides vistas in all directions over expanses of lawn and water. The island is clothed in a tapestry of groundcovers, grasses, and evergreens and features several cultivars of Satsuki azaleas. Strategically placed specimen trees, many of them donated by the Gude family, grace the lawns.

Having reached one of the farthest extremes of Brookside Gardens, take the long trek back to the informal gardens and the treasure that awaits you there: AZALEAS! The Azalea Gardens comprise approximately 5 acres and are a major component of Brookside's permanent collections. Over 20 species and 400 cultivars of azaleas can be found here, including approximately 30 kinds of deciduous hybrid cultivars. Groups represented are the Glenn Dales, Gables, Back Acres, Kurumes, Satsukis, and a sprinkling of Pericats and Mucronatums. Designed and planted by Emile Deckert, this area is criss-crossed with meandering, mulched paths, and overtopped with a canopy of pre-existing Virginia pines and tulip trees and younger, planted ornamentals. Emphasis has been placed on incorporating both woody and herbaceous companion plants with the azaleas, and good collections of witchhazels, winterhazels,

rhododendrons, hostas, and lenten-roses add color when azaleas are out of bloom. Clipped hemlocks and other evergreens provide texture and height throughout the year. It should be noted that, unlike McCrillis Gardens, masses of cultivars feature more prominently in the design of this garden rather than individual specimens.

After looking at every label on every azalea cultivar, cast your eyes downhill toward Glenallan Avenue and the Aquatic Gardens. Constructed in 1974, the two ponds are ringed with cattails, water irises, arrowhead and pickerel-weed. Water-lilies bloom in summer in the shallow areas, and an abundance of wildlife can be found here throughout the year. On a colorfully-planted island in the upper pond, a gazebo affords you a better view and a shady place to pause.

As you stroll along the banks of the ponds on your way back to the main building and your buses, notice how the azaleas on the hillside reflect in the water. I hope *you* will be able to reflect with pleasure on your visits to Brookside and McCrillis Gardens for years to come and that you will come back often!

¹ Sole credit is due to the Brookside Gardens Chapter of the Azalea Society of America under the leadership of Bob Barry for initiating and accomplishing this distribution program.

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Photographs courtesy Brookside Gardens



Azalea Gardens Scene, Brookside Gardens



Entrance gate at McCrillis Gardens. Note hand-made rhododendron leaves.