

Preserving the Past



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Maintaining a historic sculpture garden

Archer and Anna Hyatt Huntington would be astonished to see what has become of the garden they created nearly 80 years ago along South Carolina's Grand Strand. The son of a railroad tycoon and daughter of a renowned marine biologist, they were products of America's Gilded Age, and their vision for Brookgreen Gardens (www.brookgreen.org) was lacking nothing in opulence when it opened in 1932. Today, however, the grounds are brightened by more varieties of flowers and shrubs and turfgrass than they could have ever imagined.

"The public sort of demands it in public gardens now," said George Weich, vice president of horticulture for the nonprofit attraction south of Myrtle Beach. "They want to see a lot of flowers and a lot of pretty things, a lot of things they don't normally get a chance to see."

Bounded by the Waccamaw River on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, the 9,000-acre property is managed with low-impact natural fertilizers and pest control products, always with an eye to protection of visitors and of the fragile environment of the marshes and beaches, Weich said. To maintain the quality that visitors have come to expect without using chemicals requires constant vigilance, a keen eye for detail and judicious use of slow-release and organic products, with the goal of living up to the park's motto: Ever changing. Simply amazing.

Photos by Ron Barnett.



Daffodils add early spring color to a reflecting pool and statue area at Brookgreen Gardens near Murrels Inlet, S.C.



The entrance to Brookgreen Gardens.

The "Disney World effect"

Back when the Huntingtons first visited this site in 1929, it was an uninhabited mix of salt marsh, sandy ridges, freshwater tidal swamps and live oaks, the remains of four 18th century rice plantations.

Anna, a sculptor, envisioned turning the place into a garden to showcase her works, as well as those of other American sculptors. The sculpture gardens now contain a collection of more than 1,200 works, dating from the early 1800s to the present. The artwork makes Brookgreen special, but it is the gardens, laid out in the shape of a butterfly, that give this National Historic Landmark its context and setting.

Up until a few years ago, Brookgreen was mostly a spring garden, featuring azaleas and dogwoods. Within the past decade, though, the floral display has increased tenfold.

"The public has required a higher level of display," Weich said. "Sort of this 'Disney World effect.'" That means a full palate of color for each season, particularly in the high-profile areas around the sculptures.

In the wintertime, the grounds are brightened by such perennials as *Narcissus* daffodils, crocuses and spring snowflake. Shrubs include wintersweet, winter jasmine, winter honeysuckle, Flowering Quince, sweet olive, Flowering Apricot, star magnolia and several varieties of camellias.

Spring remains the showy season, with the blooms of the daffodils being joined by the colors of columbine, false indigo, iris, bloodroot, trillium, hardy orchids and atamasco lillies.

This is when the Indica azalea is in its full glory, along with native azaleas, Virginia sweetspire, rice paper plant, roses and Florida anise. The dogwoods and Weeping flowering cherries are complemented by Chinese fringe trees and granddaddy graybeards.

Spring vines include Confederate and Carolina jasmine, native wisteria, woodbine and evergreen clematis.

In the summertime, a wide array of perennials explode with color: crinum lilies, ginger lily, lantana, formosa lily, purple coneflower, plumbago, black-eyed Susan, daylily, canna and swamp hibiscus. Hydrangeas, gardenias, oleanders and American beautyberries are among the shrubs that stand out during the summer months, while the Southern and Sweet Bay magnolia and crape myrtle are also at their peak.

In the fall, blooming perennials include Confederate rose, chrysanthemum, Mexican bush sage, sweet grass, spider lily, swamp sunflower and rose. The vine, swamp Jessamine, also is at its best at this time.

Division of labor

Keeping this vast array of ornamentals in top condition without using conventional chemicals requires constant oversight by Weich and his staff,

which he has divided into two crews.

One crew, which he calls the horticulture crew, includes a dozen workers who focus on the high-maintenance areas, including the sculpture garden. The other group, the landscape crew, consists of six people who are responsible for mowing, fertilization and jobs such as planting trees.

"The real challenge of a piece of property like this is just the size and scope of it," Weich said. He's fortunate to have a host of volunteers to help out. A group of about 100 donate their time and efforts—usually about 10 at a time, working half-days.

"We really try to separate our low-maintenance areas from our high-maintenance areas, and that way you can use the staff much more efficiently," Weich explained.

About 350 acres of the property is the landscaped garden, with the sculpture area confined to about 50 acres. The low-maintenance areas are planted mostly in centipedegrass, which requires little fertilization, disease and insect control. Weich also uses low-maintenance ornamentals in these areas, such as native plants and those that thrive on little water.

Weich spares no expense in organic fertilizers, using those such as Osmocote and Nutricote. Although more costly by the pound, Weich asserts that if used properly, such a fertilization program is no more expensive than the conventional ones.

"You just have to be careful. You can't be throwing it around," he said. "If you're careful and you target your areas of high maintenance, you can use something like that just as well as you can regular fertilizers."

He also mixes the most expensive fertilizer with lower cost materials such as compost and Milorganite. He still uses some conventional turf fertilizers, but is moving toward organic in that area, as well.



A couple walks down a pathway shaded by 150-year-old Spanish moss-shrouded live oaks at Brookgreen Gardens.



Fighting Stallions, by Anna Hyatt Huntington at the entrance to the gardens she founded with her husband Archer almost 80 years ago.

Turfgrass expanses

While the sculpture garden is the main attraction here, Brookgreen has much more to offer visitors, including a zoo accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Huntington State Park, a beachfront park leased to the state of South Carolina, and several vast expanses of turfgrass. In addition to the low-maintenance centipedegrass field, there are areas of golf course-quality bermudagrass and zoysia in full sun, and St. Augustine in shady areas. Weich uses mostly Toro mowers, clipping the St. Augustine at 3 inches, centipede at 2 and bermuda at 1 inch in height. The whole garden gets mowed once a week,

but it's an ongoing process during the growing season.

"We don't stop in the summer," Weich said. "We've got six guys on Toros, and we keep them going all the time."

He overseeds some areas in the winter, but mows only once a month in the wintertime and once every couple of weeks in spring and fall.

Water conservation

"We're really trying to sell the idea of environmentally friendly horticulture and get away from heavy chemical use, and particularly in the coastal area because it's really important in the coastal areas that we don't have any water pollution, any negative effects on the environment," Weich explained.

The garden draws its irrigation water from the Waccamaw River, which requires constant cleaning of the lines. The irrigation system is decades old and in the process of being upgraded, Weich said. Most of the system runs on electrical time clocks, but it doesn't cover everywhere that water is needed.

"We still do our share of hand-watering and pulling hoses, but we try not to do too much of that," he said.

Keeping the landscape in good condition without chemicals does require plenty of handwork, and constant vigilance, Weich said. "That's just really important to stay up on things. Stay consistent with your gardening and don't let it get to a point that you can't handle it or you have to use chemicals or resort to drastic measures," he said.

"A lot of it is a lot of scouting we do," he added. "If we see a problem, we sometimes just take a pair of clippers and trim off the problems or pick off the problems, whatever we need to do."

Ron Barnett is a freelance writer and has been a frequent contributor to Turf over the years. He resides in Easley, S.C., and is always on the lookout for new and interesting stories in the Carolinas, Georgia and east Tennessee.