

Flower and Garden Shows Around the Country

Show me the flowers! Flower and garden shows are a great way to kick off the growing season. Here's the lowdown on the best shows around the nation.

By Jessica Walliser

Inspiring. Breathtakingly beautiful. Lush and convivial. Rousing and motivating, moving and exciting.

All sentiments you're likely to hear--and feel--at any one of our nation's premier flower and garden shows. These events enthuse professional gardeners, backyard gardeners and beginning gardeners alike.

They introduce new design styles and new designers.

They amuse and engross attendees, and glorify plants of every shape and size.

And most of all, they educate.

Hundreds of small home-and-garden shows occur across the country each year, and every one of them is valuable in its own right, but there are a few truly exceptional shows.

These top events set the gold standard for both design and inspiration, and they attract visitors from across the country and around the world. Feel like travelling? Check out these international flower and garden shows >>

U.S. Garden Shows Over the Years

Garden shows have been a fixture in the United States since the first show took place in Philadelphia in 1829--that's more than 175 years of celebrating the country's passion for plants and the beauty they provide.

Present day flower and garden shows promise big thrills and big ideas. Composed mainly of exhibit space, many also provide: Live demonstrations Judged competitions Lecture series Regional and national experts Entertainment A marketplace for guests to purchase plants, gardening equipment and services. Like to take photos? Here are some tips for taking photos at flower and garden shows.

Flower and garden shows have come a long way since 1829.

Many of them now draw hundreds of thousands of visitors each year and easily fill acres and acres of space. And, thankfully, there's one near you ... no matter what part of the country you call home. (Before you go, don't forget to read a few tips for making the most of your trip)

The Philadelphia Flower Show

From its humble beginnings as a small exhibit for plants grown by members of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the Philadelphia Flower Show has grown into the nation's leading garden show.

Taking place at the Pennsylvania Convention Center and encompassing over 10 acres of exhibit area, the Philadelphia Flower Show is perhaps the most noteworthy show in the nation. Exhibitors hail from all over the United States in addition to Europe, Asia and Africa.

"We work hard to keep the show fresh by bringing in new exhibitors and encouraging the existing ones to think outside the box," says show designer Sam Lemheny. "It isn't just about landscape anymore, we have to create entertainment. The gardens and the plants will always be the stars of the show, but the word 'show' is so important."

Theme: "Jazz It Up!"

The Philadelphia Flower Show entertains an estimated 300,000 people annually and works to increase the value of good horticultural practices and landscape design.

"We want the theme to be open to interpretation, to give our exhibitors some creative freedom," says Lemheny. "This allows our guests to escape to the spring and really to a fantasy world of color and entertainment and music."

The 2008 show will run from March 2 to 9 and the theme is "Jazz it up!" a celebration of New Orleans and America's great jazz legends. With promises of walled gardens, balconies, canals and fountains, this year's show is destined to be a real showstopper.

The New England Spring Flower Show

Held annually at the Bayside Expo Center in Boston, Mass., the New England Spring Flower Show is one of the country's most inspirational. Dating back to 1871, this event attracts more than 85,000 visitors and is hosted by the Massachusetts Horticultural Society.

An imaginative show, the New England Spring Flower Show boasts scores of lectures, demonstrations and in-house experts to answer your most difficult gardening questions.

"We are continually working to educate and inspire home gardeners on important trends and practices, as well as providing a much-needed respite from winter," says show director Carolyn Weston.

Theme: "Rhapsody in Green"

"This year's show, themed 'Rhapsody in Green,' will illustrate ways in which gardens can be 'green' or eco-friendly without sacrificing color, variety, texture and exciting design.

We will have exhibits featuring green roofs, water re-use techniques, xeriscaping and organic lawn care.

In addition, live musical performances in our central exhibit will fill the hall with the 'rhapsody' of spring--dancing in the aisles is encouraged!"

The 2008 show runs from March 8 to 16.

The Chicagoland Flower & Garden Show

With over 300,000 square feet of exhibit space, the Chicagoland Flower & Garden Show is held at the Donald E. Stephens Convention Center in Rosemont, Ill.

Themed gardens showcase current gardening trends and top area landscapers while 200-plus exhibitors share their expertise about various horticultural products and services; culinary demonstrations and garden-related seminars round out this exceptional event.

Teaching Garden Featured

This year's show takes place March 8 to 16 and will feature a "teaching garden" designed to show novice gardeners some smart, simple gardening techniques to get them started.

Plenty of hands-on workshops and demonstrations will be presented, and opening weekend will feature a juried art show with over 100 local artists' work on display.

The Washington Home & Garden Show

For 47 years, the Washington Home & Garden Show has ranked among the best home and garden shows on the East Coast. Housed at the billion-dollar Washington D.C. Convention Center, this expo brings full-sized landscapes to life indoors.

With over 800 booths and vendors from 41 states, the show introduces all the goodies you'll need to improve your home, both inside and out.

Display gardens in full bloom share tons of ideas with visitors while landscapers and local designers meet and greet.

"The show really prides itself on the quality of the gardens," says show producer Tom Stafford. "For us, we find that non-garden related entertainment distracts from the opportunities to learn and enjoy the gardens. So we decided to keep to the basics and we use our stage to teach and educate instead of to entertain--though we do have plenty of fanciful garden displays and even a garden railroad to keep folks interested."

A Draw for Baby Boomers

This year's show is designed to appeal especially to baby boomers with demonstrations and speakers teaching everything from planting the perfect lawn to putting a new roof on your house. "We do have plenty of vendors, but it's not a hard-core selling show. We make it fun," says Stafford.

You can visit the Washington Home and Garden Show this spring from March 13 to 16.

The San Francisco Flower & Garden Show

Four acres of stunning gardens and exhibits await you at this exciting West Coast event.

Held at The Cow Palace in Daly City, Calif., the San Francisco Flower & Garden Show isn't the biggest on the market, but it's fantastic with some of the hottest new plants displayed with care by members of the California Horticultural Society.

From orchids to bonsai to an amazing collection of some of the most fanciful display gardens, this expo has a lot to offer despite its smaller size. They even offer free childcare!

Cutting-Edge Flower Show

Show producer Kay Hamilton Estey notes that "the San Francisco Flower & Garden Show is frequently called the most 'cutting edge' of all the top shows in the world because the display gardens range from classic and traditional to over-the-top modern--there's truly something for everyone; even kids will enjoy our children's 'Sproutopia' area."

Estey says they also work hard to provide plenty of information about various "green" aspects of gardening that benefit the environment. With 60 educational presentations, this year's show runs from March 12 to 16, and promises such varied exhibits as a glass garden, a Zen spa garden and an urban forest.

The Northwest Flower & Garden Show

Beginning a mere 20 years ago, the Northwest Flower & Garden Show is a relative newcomer.

Founder Duane Kelly stresses, "We are continually working to keep abreast of how gardeners' interests are changing so we can make sure that the show continues to serve their needs.

"For example, compared to 20 years ago, there's much greater interest today in gardening without pesticides and with viewing the garden as an outdoor living space, not just a place to cultivate plants."

Kelly also notes that the show is working hard to reach out to people in their 20s and 30s.

"They have such busy lives and are pulled in so many directions; we want to make sure that gardening is as relevant to them as it was to their parents."

With the intense popularity of gardening in the Pacific Northwest, this show has grown and flourished since that first show in 1989, and has become the region's top gardening event. Held at the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle and spread over 6 acres, this flower show focuses on ideas for gardening responsibly and creatively.

This year's show will be held February 20 to 24, and displays will include a beach camp, a rooftop sanctuary and an art-deco garden.

About the Author: Horticulturalist Jessica Walliser can be heard every Saturday from 12 to 2 p.m. EST on Sirius satellite radio channel 114, where she co-hosts "The Organic Gardeners." She is co-author with Doug Oster of *Grow Organic: More Than 250 Tips and Ideas for Growing Flowers, Veggies, Lawns and More* (St. Lynn's Press, 2007).

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