

Arborcrest Gardens

Dr. Ron Stanley describes the first reaction of visitors to Arborcrest Gardens as “jaw dropping.” Understandably, as seeing is the only way to believe such a magical place exists just off King Street in downtown Boone. Standing at the precipice of 45-degree sloping hills, the scenery commands you to gaze over the garden before immersing yourself in it. As far as the eye can see are sculpted trees, conifers and shrubs in variegated shades of yellow and green; sweeping seas of colorful cascading flowers; meandering gravel and paved paths crossing over bridges; flowering vines stretching across arbors; trees with whimsical faces; rare plants and even a banana tree.

Arborcrest Gardens—a 26-acre botanical research garden nestled at the foot of Howard’s Knob—has been a labor of love for Dr. Ron Stanley for 35 years. What began as a small vegetable garden in 1989 has grown into a colossal collection of thousands of different species and cultivars of trees, shrubs, perennials, ground covers and bulbs, as well as a large vegetable/fruit test garden and greenhouse.

“I started out as a backyard gardener like everyone else. I had no idea it was going to turn into this!” exclaims Dr. Stanley. His eyes light up just talking about it. “I like to collect—I’ve always been a collector. I have an insect collection, a stamp collection, a coin collection, and now a plant collection!”

Dr. Stanley’s delight in gardening was nurtured by his grandmother at a young age.

Where Science and Beauty Collide

planted radishes, beets, and corn, and when it grew I was thinking ‘this is a miracle!’ It imprinted on me and never got out of my system. As a [high school] senior, when everyone else was out cruising around, I was growing pumpkins!”

Shortly after moving to Boone Dr. Stanley and his wife, Cheryl, purchased a five-acre tract from James Councill, descendant of a large landowner when Watauga County was simply known as Councill’s Store. The Stanleys built their present home in 1979 and soon began gardening and landscaping the grounds surrounding their property. In 1985, when the remainder of Mr. Councill’s land was auctioned, the Stanleys purchased additional tracts, expanding their property to 50 acres.

Paying homage to his grandmother, Dr. Stanley first implemented vegetables. “Vegetable gardening is the hardest form of gardening there is—there is a long learning curve,” he explains. “This is a test garden. In fact the official name is Arborcrest Gardens—‘Ornamental Evaluation and Test Garden.’” Testing close to 100 varieties of tomatoes to find which grow best in the mountains was one of his earliest endeavors. “One thing we want to do at Arborcrest is to create a brochure of the best vegetable varieties that we have tested over the past 35 years to grow in your own garden.”

Crockett—the first host on the PBS show, “The Victory Garden,” produced by WGBH in Boston. “That book was my Bible!” laughs Stanley.

The raised beds at Arborcrest are so meticulous that they were featured on “Victory Garden” in 1984, after a picture of the gardens was submitted in a national contest. Arborcrest was chosen as one of the six most impressive gardens nationwide. “We want to be more educational and scientific about our research, but yet we do attract a number of people who just love beautiful gardens—and that’s okay, too!”

“Beautiful” may be an understatement when describing the visual impression alone. Much of the garden began as an inspiration from the Stanleys’ family trips to Disney World. “When we visited there, I noticed their landscape designs. The plants were in big sweeps, overlapping, curving and meandering around,” says Stanley. Like Disney, Arborcrest creates immersive environments lending to a story of nature. Visitors aren’t the only spectators that benefit from the array of flowering vegetation. Many birds, bees and rabbits find an unending food source. There is even a fox, fondly named Rhonda, that can be spotted near her den.

The multi-ecosystems that exist in the garden are responsible for plants rarely seen

By Julie Farthing

property of a tree that’s extinct in the world, called the *Franklina* or Ben Franklin Tree. It was spotted in Georgia over 200 years ago and is no longer found in the wild. We have the Gray’s lily and a number of other plants that are endangered,” says Dr. Stanley. “Of 15,364 total cultivars tested, 7,698 are found in our garden today.”

Four years ago, Dr. Stanley realized the garden was just too glorious to keep to himself. Now, tours are offered each Friday for those wanting to experience this spectacular secret garden. Walking tours are available to those who prefer to walk the 2.5 miles of gravel and paved trails, or experience a riding educational tour conducted via electric shuttles. Learn about some of the most fascinating species—including what’s in bloom and rare specimens.

Arborcrest is looking ahead to the next 35 years as they continue to grow as a sustainable, self-sufficient 501(c)(3) non-profit research and educational botanical garden. Since they do not charge admission for tours, they rely fully on donations and grants. Come see what’s blooming at Arborcrest!

For information on booking a garden tour and how you can donate, visit arborcrestgardens.org.

