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WV Travel Team: Nation's Capital Blessed with Wondrous Gardens

By Dave Zuchowski WV Travel Team
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It may feel like another world, but this rolling vista is part of The Garden at Tudor Place, in nation's capital.

DAVE ZUCHOWSKI | Courtesy photo

WASHINGTON — Our nation's capital, some 370 miles from Charleston, has seemingly an endless list of attractions, museums and monuments that can keep you busy for days. But



one type of attraction that often goes unnoticed is the wonderful gardens, which offer a refreshing outdoor alternative with fewer crowds than they deserve.

As playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, “The best place to find God is in a garden.” On a recent visit, I took Shaw up on his word and visited four of the capital city’s loveliest gardens. It was a refreshing change from the usual (but wonderful) places many tourists often visit.



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I began my visit at Tudor Place, originally the home of Martha Washington’s granddaughter, Martha Parke Custis Peter. The house, built in 1816, has been the residence of six generations of the Peter family and is one of the first designated National Historic Landmarks in Washington. The estate opened as a public museum in 1988.

Outside, the 5½ acre garden is remarkably serene considering its location in bustling Georgetown. In the north formal garden, a boxwood knot, gleaned from Washington’s house in Mount Vernon, surrounds the rose plantings.

For a chance to rest and meditate, benches are located under the pergola and alongside the lion’s mouth fountain. Elsewhere, the original smoke house was later converted into a pigeon coop, and the biggest pecan tree in Washington was planted by a Tudor Place cook



long ago.

A walk through the glen comes highly recommended but is somewhat hidden. Just look for the huge tulip poplar near the entrance. Guided tours of the garden are offered seasonally. While entrance to the garden is free, tours of the house are \$10 and reservations are required.

The house collection holds more than 18,000 items and is the largest Washington Collection outside of Mount Vernon. Original artifacts owned by Washington are a tea set from Mount Vernon and his camp stool used during the Revolutionary War. Phone 202-965-0400 or www.tudorplace.org.

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Just across the street, Dumbarton Oaks, famous for the 1944 conference that laid the groundwork for the United Nations Charter, was once the home of wealthy U.S. ambassador Robert Woods Bliss and his wife, Mildred.



Mrs. Bliss collaborated with garden designer Beatrix Farrand over a 30-year period to create a series of terrace gardens that spill down 15-acres of the hillside. The largest, the 900-bush rose garden, is arranged in a color progression with pinks, whites and reds in the south to warmer oranges and yellows to the north. According to their wishes, the Bliss



ashes are buried in the garden.

Most visitors start touring at the 1810 Orangerie, a huge glass enclosed building connected to the house. From there, a series of garden rooms flow downhill in a conceal-and-reveal progression and include one with a Roman-style amphitheater.

A pipe-playing Pan points the way to the Lover's Lane Pool and Melisande's Allee. After strolling the cutting and kitchen gardens, Cherry Hill offers a variety of cherry tree species which make a welcome sight in early spring when the blossoms bring a beautiful contrast to the beds of tulips.

At the Elipse, a double row of American hornbeam form an aerial hedge that surrounds a 17th century Provencal Fountain. Halfway up Box Walk, the Pebble Garden is designed to include the Bliss family crest and motto. Near the house, the Star Garden is the smallest on site and is marked by astrological motifs.

This year, Dumbarton's first on-site exhibition "A Century in the Gardens" celebrates the 100th anniversary of Beatrix Farrand's design. For more information, phone 202-339-6401 or www.doaks.org/visit.

For a change of pace, try the Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens, a 12-acre park known for its 45 ponds full of water lilies, lotuses and gigantic Victoria water lilies. Almost as popular is the raised boardwalk, good for plant and animal viewing in the largest remaining tidal marsh in the DC area.





During my late May visit, water lily blossoms were just beginning to open here and there. In July, when they're at their peak, the gardens stages its annual Lotus and Water Lily Festival, when as many as 1,000 visitors show up each day.

Civil War veteran Walter B. Shaw bought the land on which the garden now stands in 1879 and began growing water lilies commercially. The successful business soon began drawing visitors and went on to become one of the nation's largest aquatic nurseries.

The federal government bought the property in 1938, and gardens became a National Park Service site a year later. Ranger-led guided tours are offered, but self-guided tours are also popular. Tour times are announced on the Visitor Center bulletin board and on the park website www.nps.gov/keaq. Admission is free. Phone 202-692-6080.

Even larger than Kenilworth, the National Arboretum has been around since 1922, sprawls over 445 acres and is a major research center for the USDA. While trees are an obvious focus, more than 7,000 kinds of plants in special collections include azaleas, bonsai, camellias, hollies, apple trees and slow-growing conifers. The National Herb Garden spotlights historic roses, themed plots and, of course, herbs.

Interesting spots include the National Grove of State Trees (West Virginia's state tree, the sugar maple, is included), Fern Valley, with its collection of native cultivars, and the National Capitol Columns, a set of 22 Corinthian columns that once graced the US Capitol



from 1828 to 1958, They were removed during a reconstruction project and relocated to a hilltop in the Elipse Meadow.

Be sure not to miss the National Bonsai and Penjing Museum, located in a spectacular enclave where displays of living horticultural sculptures dazzle the imagination. The tiny bonsai, which may be decades old, are pruned and their branches shaped using wire to give the impression of ancient trees.

Free admission. Phone 202-245-4523.

One of my favorite private gardens, Hillwood, lies on the estate of Marjorie Merriweather Post, heir to the Postum Cereal Company. Thirteen acres of formal gardens extend from the house's terraces and porches in a progression of "outdoor rooms." Each of these rooms, meant to complement the mansion's interior spaces, is decidedly private yet connected to adjacent gardens, encouraging an intuitive flow from the French parterre to the rose garden and onto the Friendship Walk.

Other locations along the walk include the Four Seasons Overlook (from here you can see the Washington Monument 3.8 miles in the distance), a putting green, the Lunar Lawn and my personal; favorite, the Japanese Garden. There's even a dog cemetery and a Dacha, a Russian country house.

4155 Linnean Avenue. Phone 202-686-5807.

For more information on Washington DC, phone 202-789-7000 or www.washington.org.

For a place to stay the Hotel Harrington is located 1/2 block away from Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and Capitol and within walking distance to many attractions. To make things even more convenient, the Metro is two blocks away. The hotel also offers a full-service restaurant, a quick service restaurant, a friendly pub and a gift shop offering tickets for great local sightseeing tours.



Located at the corner of 11th & E Streets, NW in the heart of DC. Phone 800- 424-8532 for reservations. or [hotelharrington.com](https://www.hotelharrington.com).

Dave Zuchowski has been writing about travel for 26 years, and his articles have made the pages of many newspapers and magazines across the country, including AAA, Pathfinders, West Virginia Magazine, Southsider, and Westsylvania. He writes for the Herald-Standard Newspaper, based in Fayette County, Pennsylvania.

