

Gardens at the Gold Museum

By Sandy Chapman

On the almost sunny west side of the smallest Georgia historic site in a town that is a registered historic Main Street City and the best small town in Georgia, lives a garden that has an impressive community history of its own.

The town is Dahlonega, site of the first major gold rush in the United States almost two hundred years ago and of a U.S. mint that operated from 1838 to 1861. It is also the 2023 Best Small Town in Georgia according to Southern Living magazine.

Located about 60 miles north of Atlanta at the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains, Dahlonega is a popular tourist destination drawing upwards of 200,000 visitors for the Gold Rush weekend each fall and hundreds of visitors each week. Tourists are drawn to the quaint downtown square with its 1800's mining town vibe and slow pace. The centerpiece of the square is the Dahlonega Gold Museum housed in one of the oldest remaining county courthouses in Georgia, built in 1836.

At just a quarter acre, the Dahlonega Gold Museum is the smallest official Georgia Historic Site. It features an interesting display of gold mining equipment and a full set of gold U.S. coins struck in the Dahlonega mint. One little known secret at the museum is upstairs in the courtroom where you can ask the park ranger to show you the closet. Inside, a close up view of bricks made from local clay reveals the sparkle of gold dust.

But there is more notable history outside on the grounds of the Gold Museum. On the west side where the sunlight peeks through treetops is a garden salvaged from pot holes and a parking lot. Local legend suggests the pot holes collected gold dust and a nugget or two after a good rain back in the rush days. Today, golden hued flowers take their place. Over the years the Georgia Mountains Master Gardeners (GAMMG) with support from Friends of the Dahlonega Gold Museum (FODGM) and the Gold Diggers garden club have worked to revive the museum grounds. Because the gold museum grounds are Georgia state property, they are not maintained by the city but are lovingly nurtured, weeded and planted today by Donna Buchanan and other members of GAMMG. On any given Wednesday, you may see her in visor and gloves making sure the museum grounds shine as brightly as the gold inside. "The Gold Museum grounds are the focal point of downtown Dahlonega and we are working to create a welcoming impression for our many visitors", said Buchanan.

Her predecessor, Nicole Angell, accepted responsibility for planting and upkeep of the Museum gardens in 2020 and was responsible for establishing the bones of the gardens. "Nothing beats working on the Dahlonega Gold Museum grounds for the chance to not only care for the plantings there, but also for the amazing interactions one has with the public", according to Angell.

With thousands of annual visitors milling around the museum and grounds, the upkeep just to mitigate foot damage is constant, especially after festivals. This is one reason for the liberal use of pine bark in landscaping. The lovely trees surrounding the square provide dappled shade for much of the year but limit plant options to those that prefer some shade. The gold dusted pot holes and west side parking lot were transitioned to patio and planters years ago but are still evolving with plants chosen for the unique location and to give homage to



the history of Dahlonega. The current design has the characteristics of English garden style with an informal structure, layered plantings and a variety of flowers.



A tour around the museum includes stories of plants donated by gardeners and organizations. Lenten roses donated from a local man's woods, Connie Monroe's hydrangea, butterfly bushes donated by Gold Diggers garden club and FODGM and daylilies donated from local gardeners all grow there. There is even a lavender plant in homage to the local lavender farm. Tickseed, echinacea and St. John's wort from Donna Buchanan's own garden and her sister's yard in North Carolina adorn the layered garden. It is this volunteer spirit of combining resources and doing the necessary work to improve and maintain that makes the museum gardens an impressive part of community history.

GAMMG is a volunteer partner of the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service to enhance horticultural efforts. In 2022, GAMMG members donated over 2000 hours of community service on projects throughout Lumpkin and Dawson counties. Whether teaching about plants or working in the garden at the Dahlonega Gold Museum and around town,

Georgia Mountains Master Gardeners are giving back to the community.

Community support and volunteerism have always been an important part of Dahlonega's cache. From gathering gold to gild the state capitol dome to the movement to preserve and maintain Georgia's smallest historic site, the best small town in Georgia delivers.

So the next time you drive around the square and see Donna Buchanan or other master gardener volunteers tending to the garden, give them a wave. Or better yet, take a stroll around the museum grounds and enjoy the flowers.



Sources:

Georgia Department of Natural Resources State Parks & Historic Sites

2023 Guide to Georgia State Parks & Historic Sites

Lumpkin County Historical Society

Dahlonega.org

Georgia Master Gardener Handbook Eighth Edition

I Remember Dahlonega, Volume 4 by Anne Amerson

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