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Floriade: International horticultural expo blooms in Holland VENLO, Netherlands
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FLORIADE: DETAILS

ABOUT THE SHOW Floriade runs through Oct. 7 in Venlo, Netherlands. Hours are 10 a.m.-7 p.m. daily; until midnight from mid-June through August, with cinema and light shows at night. Expect a visit to take seven hours. The show is wheelchair-accessible. Admission is \$40, \$20 for ages 4- 12.

GETTING THERE Venlo is a small city on the Netherlands' eastern border with Germany. It is 80 miles from Amsterdam and about the same distance from Brussels, typically a two-hour trip by car or train. It's slightly closer to the Hague and Rotterdam and closer still to the Dutch cities of Maastricht and Eindhoven and Germany's Dusseldorf and Cologne. Shuttle buses run from Venlo's central train station to the fairgrounds.

DETAILS www.floriade.com.

Venlo – Netherlands

The sun is shining, trees are budding and flowers are unfurling their brilliant petals a bit earlier than planned, thanks to an early Dutch spring and the hundreds of gardeners putting finishing touches on Floriade, the once-a-decade world horticultural exposition.

Organizers are reluctant to repeat the expo's billing as "the greatest flower show on Earth," because, they say, horticulture encompasses the artistic, scientific and economic aspects of plant care, not just gardening and looking at flowers. Still, flowers are bound to be a major draw, and there are a heck of a lot of them to see. In all, 1.8 million bulbs have been planted across the exposition's 108-acre grounds.

They complement 190,000 perennial flowering plants, 18,000 shrubs, 15,000 hedge plants and 3,000 trees. One typically Dutch garden already in bloom flaunts two adjacent vistas: one patch of royal purple tulips, mixed with grape and cornflower blue hyacinths. Adjoining it is an eye-popping combination of red and yellow tulips with red, white and blue "baby breath" hyacinths, also known as grape hyacinths.

Folding chairs that look like tulips when they snap shut offer a place to sit down and take it all in. More than 100 participants, many of them countries or regions, have displays showing off some of their best-known foliage. Some, including China, have built pavilions devoted to the latest trends in plant care and display. It's "a different experience than a theme park or a zoo," says spokesman Mark Wijman. "It's a very relaxing place, just to walk around and see beautiful things."

Don't worry about missing the plants or flowers in bloom, Wijman says. When one field of gardening SWAT teams will toil through the night to replace them. In addition, whole gardens of perennials have been planted in such a way that new blooms will unfold in different patterns and rippling colors as spring makes way for summer and fall. Floriade runs through Oct. 7 and is counting on 2 million visitors from the Netherlands and Germany alone, plus gardening aficionados, flower fans and businesspeople from every corner of the world. Visitors can get an overview of the massive scale of the grounds by taking a gondola ride over the treetops, looking down on the splashes of color and buildings far below.

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Five divisions

While trying to get a handle on all there is to see at Floriade is daunting, there are five broad divisions.

To the right of the entrance is the Green Engine. It includes Villa Flora, the indoor part of the exhibition, showcasing "classic, modern, trendy and extreme" tastes.

Straight ahead of the entrance is Environment, which, among other things, includes a competition on office gardens and some of the expo's commercial exhibits. One is a practical idea: Admire a particular garden layout and think it might look good in your own backyard? Nearby shops are selling packages of bulbs and seeds to help you replicate it.

To the left of the entrance is the World Show Stage, which contains many of the national displays, as well as live performances in the late afternoon and into the night on weekends.

It's also one end of the aerial gondola. On the other end of the gondola, far right of the entrance, is the Relax and Heal zone, where the structures are white, the tea is mint and the cuisine is mostly Asian.

Farthest opposite the entrance is Education and Innovation, which has greenhouse displays including tropical plants from Asia and other equatorial regions, as well as the expo's largest displays for children. International flair Individual contributors fund their own displays, often with the help of local businesses eager to show off their country's best.

Germany's neighboring province of North Rhine-Westphalia has funded a wooden structure of sloping angles, reminiscent of recent Scandinavian architectural designs. Its highly crafted display conceals miniature manicured gardens, unexpected vistas and beanbags for visitors to relax on. Perhaps with a nod to Europe's economic crisis, a Greek garden is simplicity itself: a grove of gnarled olive trees planted in rocky soil.

Some countries' displays -- including Italy's -- are on a promenade along a man-made lake where kiosks sell snacks and offer spots to relax in the sun or shade. Fun for kids There's a children's program in which youngsters lead their parents on a hunt through the grounds.

Adults get a chance to take in the displays while the kids seek information to win a prize. There are also playgrounds and buildings for children, notably the House of Flavor, where kids can play games. One display involves a Jack-and-the-Beanstalk plant with a tube of water stretching high up in the sky: Kids can operate a pump, sending a bubble of air floating upward. Elsewhere, kids can help fry vegetables with the help of staff cooks; another room lets them sit in the driver seat of a tractor as footage of fields being plowed rolls by.

One of the Innovation restaurants serves produce grown on the premises, including strawberries in at least a dozen varieties. White asparagus, a regional specialty, is grown in a cryptlike structure with wonderfully creepy text above the door (so far only in German and Dutch): "Here lies buried the white queen, yet she should not at all be mourned, for such is her life's desire and end."