

## **The Boston Globe**

A tropical abundance at the Northwest Flower show

By Sally Ruth Bourrie, Globe Correspondent, 2/4/2001

SEATTLE West of the Cascades, 300-foot Douglas fir trees form magnificent stands alongside weeping Western hemlocks and feathery Western red cedars.

The forests are layered, conifers protecting moisture-loving deciduous trees like vine maples and wild cherries. They, in turn, shelter shrubs that set the winter woodland on fire: brilliant redbird dogwoods, native plums with miniature cherry blossoms, and yellow-flowering winter hazels. Down to the carpets of moss and lily-pod-like trilliums, there is no bare earth.

This natural abundance extends indoors this week during the Northwest Flower & Garden Show, where the overflowing Pacific Northwest garden style will be on display in 27 gardens on five acres.

Since 1991, the Northwest show has been the nation's third-largest flower show, with about 80,000 visitors, compared with Philadelphia's 220,000 and New England's 150,000. And in contrast to its Eastern counterparts, the Northwest show reflects a different attitude.

Here, gardening is considered a process of plant selection, editing, and management rather than domination, in contrast to the East, where more formal gardens display greater European influence through such things as boxwood parterres, stone paving, and symmetry.

"The Northwest Garden Style is both a reflection of the rainforest that surrounds us and a demonstration of man's the Northwest gardener's, instinctive trust of nature," said Steve Lorton, Northwest bureau chief of Sunset magazine. "Our gardens tend to be lush and overgrown ... and an unusual and intense amalgamation of forms and colors and textures."

"The Northwest lends itself to the mindset of the natural," said David Ohashi, whose layered compositions at the Northwest show typify the style.

For last year's show, Ohashi paired conifers with huge rhododendron trees in a giant canopy that emulated nature. A yellow winter hazel and fragrant pink viburnum provided some of the garden's few nongreen tones.

He also built a wooden hut alongside a pond, with a waterfall of columnar basalt rocks. Placing each boulder to balance the others, while still looking spontaneous, is a specialty of Japanese gardening that's seen frequently in this region.

The show's gardens aren't limited to realism, however. Landscape designer Bob Chittock has created fantasies for one of Seattle's largest nurseries, Molbak's, since the show began in 1989. He's replicated Tivoli Gardens and built a Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs exhibit, complete with coal mine.

The Northwest show also prides itself on avant-garde ideas. This week, designer Dean Backholm promises a chocolate, eggplant, and mahogany garden, entitled "When the Deep Purple Falls." As he describes it, the garden will be "less Martha (Stewart), more Miro," influenced by "Chagall, Coltrane, and Ayn Rand."

Gardeners love the Pacific Northwest because they can grow perhaps the widest range of plants in the country. "There aren't any extremes of cold or heat, it's constantly moist, there's no blazing sun to contend with," said Lorton of Sunset magazine. "This produces this delicious rainforest wilderness."

Tropical plants in Northwest gardens don't achieve the size and flamboyance they do in a single East Coast steam-bath summer. But plants that are annuals in more severe climates such as rosemary can become gigantic in the mild winters, and a rose bush described as 4 to 5 feet high in a nonlocal catalog could easily reach 6 to 7 feet here.

But it's not just nature; it's the desire to garden. Entrepreneur Duane Kelly, who founded the event after seeing the Philadelphia and Boston shows, discovered a higher per capita readership for gardening magazines in the Northwest than anywhere except the Delaware Valley.

Landscape architect Tom Iversen has noticed gardens everywhere, even as Seattle's land values skyrocket and more people live in condominiums. "Everybody has a little entry garden, or they have a terrace or deck," he said.

The Massachusetts Horticultural Society and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, which run the New England and Philadelphia shows, were instrumental in helping Kelly develop the Northwest show.

"There's a level of communication and camaraderie among the major shows in the United States," said society President Dr. John C. Peterson.

Unlike its Eastern counterparts, the Northwest show is a for-profit business. Kelly, who serves on the American Horticultural Society's board, believes that the others are anomalies, successful thanks to their century-long traditions. No other US horticulture group has replicated their achievement.

Kelly's innovation to the traditional garden show model has been in introducing more than 100 free seminars and demonstrations with admission, which tops out at \$18 for a day. Orchid, bonsai, and Japanese flower arranging are also prominent components.

Despite the display gardens, specialty products, and other exhibits, the question remains: Why go to a garden show when you're surrounded by greenery and in February you can prune and weed and even plant bulbs to your heart's content?

As landscape designer Chittock put it, going inside the Washington State Convention & Trade Center during February's unremitting gray opens up "a whole other world." Delphiniums, peonies, foxgloves, and all sorts of flowers are in early bloom.

But what it really comes down to, Iversen said, is that in the Pacific Northwest "so many people are nuts over plants."

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