

The History of Rotary Botanical Gardens

Rotary Botanical Gardens is a non-profit, award-winning botanical showcase, located on 20-acres in the heart of Janesville, Wisconsin. Our awe-inspiring landscapes and gardens are a vibrant and welcoming host to an estimated 100,000 visitors each year. Supported solely by donations, the Gardens receive no tax dollars.

The Gardens occupy the site of an abandoned sand and gravel quarry on Palmer Drive. In 1988, the original site between Lions Beach and Kiwanis Pond was covered with debris and used as storage for the Parks Department and a BMX bicycle racetrack. The Gardens' founder and original visionary, retired orthodontist Dr. Robert Yahr, approached the two Rotary Clubs in Janesville and inquired about their interest in developing a botanical garden for the community to enjoy. Both clubs agreed to this service project. Dr. Yahr's original idea was to clean up the pond and surrounding area as a club project, but his imagination began to soar and the result was an ambitious new project for Janesville Rotarians.

The clubs began with a 10-year plan to clean up the grounds, create gardens with international themes, convert an old brick structure to a visitors' center, improve the area across the road from the proposed gardens, and develop and beautify the Ice Age Trail. On May 2, 1988, the City of Janesville agreed to lease what is now a 20-acre site to the Janesville Rotary Foundation at no charge for a period of 99 years. Rotarians began their work at the site with a massive cleanup effort, removing tons of broken glass, rusty barrels, old tires, concrete slabs, rusty cyclone fencing and underbrush. With the cooperative efforts of volunteers and the expertise of engineers, contractors and carpenters, the project moved ahead. Jobs Bank workers from General Motors began renovation of the dilapidated brick building, first fortifying the foundation, and then gutting the interior. Duane Rath donated \$160,000 for the complete renovation. The refurbished structure, the Rath Environmental Center, housed a meeting room, library, solarium, workshop and second floor administrative offices.

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps provided assistance with the development of the gardens, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources helped with the pond. Wooden benches were installed to provide resting spots at the water's edge and along the walkways, and brick paths were created that are marked with the names of people who made financial contributions.

Structures completed in 2002 as result of a \$3.2 million campaign included: a new horticultural building and the Parker Visitor/Educational Center (an expansion of the Rath Environmental Center) with meeting rooms, educational classrooms and a gift shop.

With the help of local Rotarians, countless volunteers, supporters and the City of Janesville, Rotary Botanical Gardens has become a botanical treasure enjoyed by both the community and visitors from around the country and the world. It has grown into a retreat which offers peace, beauty and serenity, but also serves as a prime destination for educational programs, family-friendly events, weddings and community gatherings.

About Dr. Robert Yahr

Dr. Robert Yahr was dogged in his dream to create an internationally-themed botanical garden and orchestrated unique collaborations with local Rotary and service clubs, the City of Janesville, businesses, labor unions, citizens and private donors to make it a reality. Now in his 80s, Dr. Yahr maintains an emeritus position on the Board of Directors and strolls through the Gardens on a daily basis.

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Did You Know...?

- Originally there was no dirt in the Gardens, it was nearly 100% sand and gravel. Over 15,000 yards (800 truckloads) of topsoil had to be hauled during the course of this and the following year.
- During 1989 intense planning, structural improvements, cleanup and landscaping were carried out. It was also the year that the Japanese bridge was constructed.
- In 1990, a group of volunteers affectionately referred to as “The Grumpies” (from the movie Grumpy Old Men) was formed. The purpose of the group was to provide volunteer labor in the Gardens on a scheduled rather than random basis. The original four members were Dr. Robert Yahr, Dr. Dick Sholl, Norm Carle and Bob Duckert. The “Grumpies” are still an incredibly active volunteer group and continue to meet every week, year-round. The number of “Grumpies” has grown sizably, and is inclusive of men and women of all ages.
- In 1991, the Gardens welcomed 17,000 visitors, installed the first signage, placed the first memorial bricks and positioned the bronze sculpture created by Vern O. Shafer named “Dialogue” in 1991.
- Volunteers reconstructed an ornate arch in 1992 that was donated by the Rock County Historical Society. It was the original (1919) frame to the entrance of the Parker Pen Company’s Janesville Headquarters and is now the entrance leading from the Reception Garden into the Sunken Garden.
- The Japanese Garden was formally dedicated in 1992. It has since been named one of the top 25 Japanese gardens in North America.
- In 1993, the Gardens became an independent 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization with a volunteer board of directors. Rotary Botanical Gardens is self-funded, and does not receive any city, state or federal funding. It relies solely upon the generosity of its Friends members, admissions, special events, and corporate partnerships.
- In 1995, the Shade, Rhododendron, Azalea and Scottish Gardens were developed.
- The fundraising event now known as the Garden Gala (formerly the Dinner Dance) was held for the first time in 1996. The event raised \$17,000 for continued garden development.
- In 1997, the first-ever Holiday Light Show event took place. At that time it was named Winter Wonderland and featured 15,000 lights. It now boasts over 330,000 twinkling lights.
- The Gardens announced it would become an All-America Selections display garden in 2002. The Gardens has since been awarded first-place in the All-America Selections landscape design contest in 2012 and 2013.
- Another Vern O. Shaffer sculpture, “Biota”, was moved from the former Rath headquarters to the Gardens in 2006 and now sits in the southeast corner.
- In 2007, the terrace was built and the garden area behind the terrace was designated and is now known as the Nancy Yahr Memorial Children’s Garden. Themes for this popular garden change every two years.

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- Rotary Botanical Gardens celebrated its 20th Anniversary on August 5, 2009 with free admission, guided tours and refreshments.
- In 2010, the North Point Garden, providing a picturesque view of the pond was added.
- The Holiday Light Show welcomed over 13,000 visitors in both 2012 and 2013.
- Rotary Botanical Gardens earned Travel Green Wisconsin certification from the Wisconsin Department of Tourism in 2013.
- QR Code signage was placed in the Gardens during the summer of 2013 to provide guests with a technological interactive experience. Smart phone users are able to access information regarding wedding gardens, volunteer opportunities, link to the Gardens' Facebook page and more.
- 2014 marks the 25th Anniversary of Rotary Botanical Gardens. The anniversary will be commemorated with "free days" on the 25th of every month during admission season, a Founder's Dinner to honor Dr. Yahr and other surprises along the way.

