

TRAVEL • THINGS TO DO

## These Are America's Most Gorgeous Botanical Gardens

You don't have to travel to a national park to reconnect with nature.

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Get back out there with a trip to a botanical garden. | Cole Saladino/Thrillist

While our country has some awe-inspiring national parks, for the majority of people who dwell in cities, getting there isn't always easy. Cherry blossom season across the country is beautiful, but not everyone can make it in time to catch the blooms. And, sure, there are a wealth of great city parks built specifically to deliver us from chaos—but should a cloudless, sunny day dare rear its beautiful head, chaos in the form of overzealous picnickers is sure to follow.

For a real oasis, a slice of private forest amid the urban jungle, and time to reconnect with nature after too many days spent staring at screens, find your way to one of America's best botanical gardens—one or two of which may sit right in your backyard.



Is that Lady Danbury I see? | Courtesy of Filoli

**Filoli Botanical Garden**

*Bayside, California*

Kicking off with the entry with the catchiest name, Filoli looks like something straight out of *Bridgerton* and feels a little bit like walking through a floral-scented dream. Tended to by 14 full-time horticulturalists, this is an ideal place for those who want to pretend they're in a fairy tale.

Wander through the Walled Garden, featuring 10-foot-high brick walls and divided up further by hedges so that you can get your own personal taste of paradise; a working fruit and vegetable garden and pool pavilion; and—how convenient for you!—a 54,256-square-foot, 56-room, ballroom-equipped palace (aka The House) fit for royalty. By the time you're through, you'll be singing to birds and squirrels like a bonafide Disney princess.



You can essentially meet Mother Nature herself in the Atlanta Botanical Garden. (PQN/Shutterstock)

**Atlanta Botanical Garden**

*Atlanta, Georgia*

No, that's not Mother Nature in the flesh (or rather, in the florals) you're looking at here: It's the 25-foot Earth Goddess sculpture at Atlanta Botanical Garden. Although she's certainly one of the park's most impressive assets—not to mention most meticulously manicured, requiring daily maintenance to keep her foliage and more than 18,000 annuals looking immaculate—she's not the only thing here that'll keep you ooh-ing and ah-ing.

There are indoor and outdoor displays featuring flora from all over the world, 20-plus species of carnivorous plants, more than 2,000 varieties of orchids, some 200 types of magnolias, over 80 kinds of maples—you name it, and it's almost certainly here. There are also a score of events and exhibitions that run year-round, as well as garden-inspired classes that'll teach you everything from sketching and cooking to the art of origami.



This might just be the best botanical garden in the five boroughs. (Pete's House)

**New York Botanical Garden**

*The Bronx, New York*

Central Park will forever be the most renowned urban respite for perpetually cramped New Yorkers, but nothing relaxes a city dweller like a trip to the NYBG. The park spans more than 250 acres, including 50 acres of preserved forestland and 50 gardens with more than a million species of plants.

It's also home to America's largest Victorian-era glasshouse at the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, where guests walk from desert to tropical landscapes and see the world's largest collection of indoor palm trees. The garden is more than just an exhibition: It educates some 90,000 underserved students a year and even boasts its own printing company.



Find a taste of the Old World in Missouri. (Courtesy of Josh Nease/Missouri Botanical Garden)

**Missouri Botanical Garden**

*St. Louis, Missouri*

Imagine you retire at 39, but the year is 1840 so there are no Ferraris or Gulfstreams to blow your money on. What would you do? Create an American botanical garden in the style of the great ones of Europe, of course. That's what Henry Shaw did when he developed the 75 acres that surrounded his country home into one of the most beautiful places in Middle America.

The gardens include his historic house and a Victorian-era observatory, one of the largest Japanese gardens on the continent, and a Turkish garden reminiscent of a Mediterranean villa. Its centerpiece is the Cluturn, a geodesic dome where you can experience climates from Hawaii, Arizona, and the coast of Italy all in a Midwestern winter's afternoon, before stepping back outside to meet blown-glass sculptures and 6,800 species of plants.



Believe it or not, this is not ancient Japan. (Photo: iStock)

Washington Park Arboretum

Seattle, Washington

This 230-acre piece of parkland between Lake Washington and I-5 is worth visiting even if you don't get out of your car (which, at the moment, is pretty clutch). The main road meandering through the park is lined with blooming trees in the spring, and the rare (in Washington, anyway) deciduous trees in the fall.

The scenic drive is just the warm-up, though. Step out of the car and you're surrounded by meticulously landscaped gardens throughout the wetlands and woodlands, leading to the park's crown jewel, the Japanese Garden. It's the largest of its kind outside Japan and home to the most impressive collection of cherry blossoms in the Pacific Northwest every spring.



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DC is home to some truly presidential sights. (Photo: iStock/Getty Images)

United States Botanic Garden

Washington, DC

DC is more than just cherry blossoms. The idea of a garden on the National Mall was first floated by Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and James Madison in the late 1700s. It was created in 1820, formally established in 1830, and has lived at its current location since 1932. The garden isn't huge—it occupies only a couple of city blocks—but is a serene, scenic respite in the shadow of the US Capitol.

The conservatory contains desert as well as tropical environments, which make for handy places to warm up during the winter. In the springtime, the garden opens up its 34-greenhouse, 85,000-square-foot production facility in Anacostia (Southeast DC) so visitors can see the massive operation that supports the national garden. And because the founding fathers would've wanted it this way, the whole thing is free for visitors.



It should be no surprise that Hawaii is home to loads of flora. (Photo: iStock/Getty Images)

Allerton and McBryde Gardens

Koloa, Kauai, Hawaii

These may not be urban gardens, but if you happen to be on the Hawaiian island of Kauai, they deserve a long, lingering visit. These gardens in the Lawai Valley, which were featured prominently in *Jurassic Park* and the fourth *Pirates of the Caribbean* flick, are the only tropical gardens established by congressional charter. They make up two-fifths of the National Tropical Botanical Garden, a federally established park that stretches throughout the Hawaiian Islands.

These two gardens sit on the south shore of Kauai, a former sugar plantation that was once a vacation destination for American royalty (looking good, Jackie O) and is now a tropical paradise accessible to the public. They're home to the largest collection of Hawaiian plants on Earth and offer the only access to Allerton Beach. And in McBryde Garden, you can take a hidden trail to a seldom-seen waterfall.



Even just a glimpse is worth it—visiting the botanical gardens. (Photo: iStock/Getty Images)

Fort Worth Botanic Garden

Fort Worth, Texas  
Dallas sometimes overlooked sibling city is not only home to one of the best zoos in the nation, it also rocks this grand botanical garden—the oldest in Texas. The 110-acre property has 22 gardens and 2,900 species of plants, and admission to the main garden is free.

For a few bucks, though, you can wander through the hot pools, stone bridges, and waterfalls of the Japanese garden or the tropical foliage of the conservancy. Next door is the Botanical Research Institute of Texas, where educational programs and rotating exhibits teach visitors about what's in the gardens.



Don't worry, there are no alligators hiding beneath them. | James W. Johnson/ChuckWebb

Kanapaha Botanical Gardens

Gainesville, Florida  
Many of the students at Gainesville's University of Florida don't even know the place exists, and that's a shame. The paths here wind through swamps with live oaks draped in Spanish moss, and through a rose garden, rock garden, and butterfly gardens.

The park's two dozen collections include the state's largest collection of bamboo, the biggest herb garden in the Southeast, and ponds full of giant Victorian water lilies. At the park's edge, visitors can relax on a bench and enjoy sweeping views of 250-acre Lake Kanapaha.



The Brooklyn Botanic Garden is home to one of the largest and oldest Japanese gardens outside Japan. | Brooklyn Botanic Garden

Brooklyn Botanic Garden

Brooklyn, New York  
While the New York Botanical Garden delivers Mother Nature to the Bronx, this century-plus-old, 52-acre botanical garden gives Brooklynites a seriously beautiful dose of greenery. Although it's home to one of the best cherry blossom displays on the Eastern Seaboard (which you should absolutely catch if you're in town during the bloom) this one owes just about any time of year, attracting more than a million annual visitors in the process.

The most popular section of this one by far is the Japanese Hill-and-Pond Garden, featuring a torii gate and a small Shinto shrine, but you'll also find a Native Flora Garden, a Rose Garden, a Shakespeare Garden, and more. In any case, there are 18,000 kinds of plants from all over the world here, so chances are you'll find a floral arrangement that suits your fancy.



The San Jose Botanical Garden. | San Jose Botanical Garden/Google Images

San Francisco Botanical Garden

San Francisco, California  
It's no wonder that San Francisco, with weather that shifts quicker than a Game of Thrones plotline, can produce one of the most naturally biodiverse botanical gardens in the world. The 55-acre gardens in Golden Gate Park are home to 8,000 different kinds of plants, native to climates from all parts of the world.

High-elevation tropical gardens befitting equatorial mountains? Check. Native California redwoods? Of course. The most diverse collection of Magnolias outside China? Sure! Why not? And beyond the plant diversity, there's a garden completely devoted to fragrant flowers and one devoted entirely to moon gazing. Because it still is San Francisco, after all.



Here's a tip: walk to the Glidded Age. | iStockphoto.com

Sonnenberg Gardens & Mansion State Historic Park

Catskilldopia, New York  
The Glidded Age mansion (named for the German translation of "sunny hill") is really the undercard to the main attraction at this New York State Historic Park. The meticulously landscaped grounds make up one of only two public gardens in the New York State Parks system.

Here, you'll be greeted by striking architecture sprinkled between more than a dozen gardens and greenhouses that offer up the sort of features one would expect in a garden five times the size, including a sublimely diverse rose garden, an Italian garden full of blue and red perennials, and the Sub-Rosa Garden featuring a marble fountain, cherubim statues, and a deep pool. This nonprofit garden relies on donations, so don't forget to show your appreciation at the door.

## **Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens**

*Columbus, Ohio*

That great rock 'n' roll philosopher Dick Valentine once asked, "What's so great about a buckeye?" Clearly, Dick had never been to the Franklin Park Conservatory, where in addition to housing 400 plant species ranging from tropical to Himalayan, there's also an incubator for buckeye trees.

Ohio's state tree aside, this park was also the first in America to have a seasonal butterfly exhibition, where for the past 22 years tropical butterflies have fluttered through the Pacific Island Water Garden. Franklin Park is also home to a Hot Shop where visitors can watch artists blow glass. And every night, the John F. Wolfe Palm House is lit up by 7,000 LED lights, creating an in-park explosion of color after dark.



In Dallas, find the biggest flower festival in the Southwest. (W. Scott McGill/Shutterstock)

## **Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden**

*Dallas, Texas*

Say this for Texans: they really do go all-out. The DFW Metroplex boasts two of the best botanical gardens in America, the more famous of which is this 66-acre park that opened in 1984. The park and arboretum is home to 19 gardens—there's a magnolia glade, a pecan grove, even trial gardens where scientists see how various plants react to the North Texas environment.

It's also home to the biggest spring flower festival in the Southwest with 500,000 blooms park-wide. And in the fall? The gardens are saturated with 50,000 pumpkins. Definitely come back here in the fall.



Take a break from the beach to hit this botanical garden. (Photo courtesy of Fairchild Tropical Gardens)

## **Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden**

*Coral Gables, Florida*

Located far down Old Cutler Road from the steel and glass high-rises of Brickell, and across Biscayne Bay from the bright lights of South Beach, this 83-acre tropical oasis sits as a shady escape in [Miami's coolest suburb](#). Here visitors can get a taste of what Miami was like before the swamps were dredged—mangrove gardens, pine rocklands, and palm savannahs dot the landscape, while flamingos huddle in the shallow lakes under the palms.

The collections here are impressive, to say the least: 40 species of tropical birds at the Wings of the Tropics Conservancy, and another 450 species of rare plants in the 16,500sqft Tropical Plant Conservancy. While communing with nature might not be at the top of everyone's Miami to-do list, a trip here feels more tropical than almost anywhere in the city.



Find fields of prickly friends in the Desert Botanical Garden. | ShootPhoto/LC/Fx/Getty Images

**Desert Botanical Garden**

*Phoenix, Arizona*

This is a particularly fun one; botanical gardens need not be green to be lush. The folks at the Arizona Native Plant Society, who established this place in 1939, wanted to educate people about the unique plant and animal life of the Sonoran Desert, as well as the people who call it home.

The result is this 140-acre garden in Papago Park where five different walking loops take visitors through desert wildflowers, arid herb gardens, and lessons about how people have long lived in the desert. It boasts 50,000 plants throughout the five trails, and—if you go when it's not 110 degrees outside—it's a scenic, educational way to enjoy the warm Arizona sunshine.



What else would you expect from the Rose City? | Craig Tuttle/Getty Images

**International Rose Test Garden**

*Portland, Oregon*

Though a rose garden isn't technically a botanical garden, PORTLAND DOESN'T NEED TO PLAY BY YOUR RULES, MAN! It's also the Rose City, so logic would dictate it would be home to a place designated to test new varieties of roses, including one of only six gardens to test miniature roses. The place has more quirks: its individual rose plots have names like Neil Diamond, Prima Donna, and Baby Boomer, and the Shakespeare Garden was originally intended to only include plant life mentioned in the Bard's plays.

The whole thing sits on only 4.5 terraced acres, most of which have sweeping views of Downtown Portland, the Willamette River, and—on clear days—Mount Hood. And if you haven't gotten your fill, the Rose Garden is in Portland's sprawling Washington Park, meaning you can stroll over to the city's lush Japanese Garden or hike through a patch of old-growth forest to the famous Hoyt Arboretum.



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