

Lewis Ginter looking back, moving forward on 25th anniversary

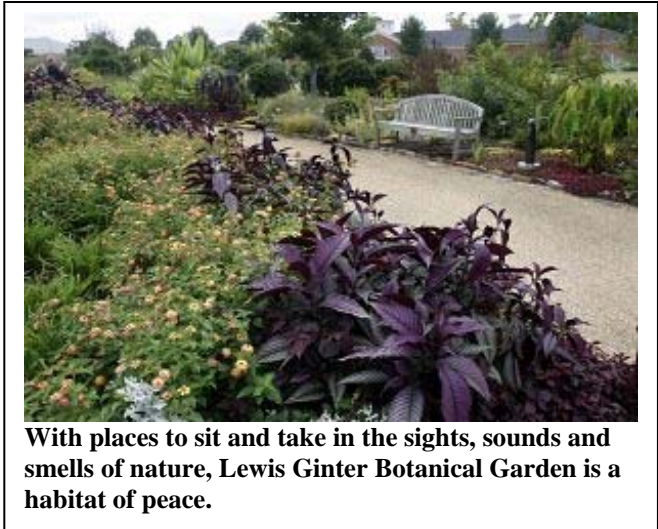
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Seduce them with floral color, then clobber with education.

Robert S. Hebb's strategy for the creation Richmond botanical garden 25 years ago easier said than done: build a world-class educational facility and tourist attraction with plant collections, display gardens, teaching areas and a research program.

Hebb, first executive director of what would become Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, had trained at the Harvard University arboretum and the Mary Flagler Cary Arboretum of The New York Botanical Garden, so his knowledge and experience were extensive.



Still, it must have been difficult to envision Ginter in 1984.

The garden site, the old Bloemendaal estate at Lakeside Avenue and Hilliard Road, had been neglected for almost 20 years. The property was choked with weeds, its lake was clogged with silt and the mansion - built by Richmond tobacco magnate Lewis Ginter and subsequently taken over by his niece, Grace Arents - had fallen into disrepair.

Combine that with daunting fundraising tasks, power struggles and a dash of politics, and it's a wonder the bulb ever flowered.

"It's remarkable that in such a short time, we've gone from open fields to plant sales with half of Richmond there and all of the wonderful facilities," said Hebb, who resigned from Ginter in 1991 and is a freelance plant photographer living in retirement in Henrico County.

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Frank Robinson sipped his morning coffee in the café inside Lewis Ginter's sprawling visitors center on a recent summer morning, glancing out of the expansive windows at guests setting out on pathways crisscrossing the 83-acre estate.

"We were the No. 1 paid destination in Richmond last year," said Robinson, Ginter's executive director for the past 17 years and author of a silver-anniversary book, "Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden: 25 Years and Growing."

A lot of people didn't believe the garden would succeed in the early 1980s, Robinson said. "They didn't know what a botanical garden was or what you'd do there."

But key elements helped the seed take root. Richmond was flush with philanthropists, fundraisers, devout garden-clubbers, corporate giants and backyard gardens bearing the imprint of landscape architects such as Charles Gillette and William H. Spell.

Twenty-five years later, Ginter is a magnet for 270,000 Richmonders and out-of-town visitors annually and has a 2009 budget of \$3.9 million. Its sprawling, diverse landscape hosts plant shows, butterfly exhibits, classes, child's play, a Christmas light festival and personal celebrations, such as weddings and birthdays.

It started slowly. The first new projects were the Henry M. Flagler Perennial Garden and the Robins Tea House in 1993.

Expansion accelerated dramatically during the past decade thanks to a \$41 million capital campaign that kicked off in 1997 and concluded in 2004. Additions included the Anne Holt Massey Greenhouses, E. Claiborne Robins Visitors Center, a 3-acre plot that includes a healing garden and a sunken garden, an education/library complex, a conservatory, a children's garden and a rose garden.

Mary Wick, who has witnessed two decades of the garden's growth as a student, volunteer and board member, considers the conservatory the crowning jewel. "It made us a year-round destination," she said.

Lewis Ginter's leaders have spent almost three decades luring people to the garden. Now, they say, it's time for the garden to return the favor and focus outward.

"We always want people to come here and always want it to be new, different and exciting," Robinson said. "But we now have the staff, resources and expertise to give something of value to the community as a whole."

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The garden's potential intrigued Hebb, who also had trained at England's prestigious Kew Gardens, which, coincidentally, sits on a bank of the River Thames near Richmond and celebrates its 250th anniversary this year.

"It was an incredible opportunity to come down here and be on the ground floor to start up a brand-new, full-fledged botanical garden," he said in an interview last week. "But we were the new kid on the block. We were unknown."

Timeline

1884: Lewis Ginter bought the property and built the Lakeside Wheel Club, a one-story destination for Richmond bicyclists that was later modified and incorporated into Bloemendaal House.

1897: Lewis Ginter died at age 73.

1913: Grace Arents, Ginter's niece, bought and remodeled the abandoned Lakeside Wheel Club. She added a second story and made it a convalescent home for sick city children. Eventually Arents moved into the house with her companion, Mary Garland Smith, and called it Bloemendaal in tribute to the Ginter family's Dutch ancestors. She developed gardens at Bloemendaal, which means "valley of flowers."

1926: Grace Arents died at 78. She willed life rights to Smith and stipulated that after Smith's death, the city of Richmond was to develop the property as a botanical garden honoring Lewis Ginter.

1968: Mary Garland Smith died at age 100. The city took possession of the property and investigated plans for a botanical garden. None came to fruition, and the property languished.

1981: A group of botanists, horticulturists and residents formed Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden Inc. to uphold the will of Arents. A lawsuit ensued.

1984: An amicable settlement allowed the formation of the garden. The Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden was chartered by court decree.

1989: The Garden Club of Virginia restored the Grace Arents Garden as the first site of the new Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

1993: The three-acre Henry M. Flagler Perennial Garden was completed and dedicated, a gift of the Flagler Foundation. The Robins Tea House was built and dedicated, a gift of E. Claiborne and Lora Robins.

2004: \$41 million campaign completed.

2009: 25th anniversary of the garden.

SOURCE: Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden

Hebb headed to Richmond with two truckloads of plants from his former employer, the New York Botanical Garden. He went out into the community to speak to groups, recruit volunteers and promote the promise of a world-class garden. Residents responded with plant collections, time and money.

He sent letters to about 400 botanical gardens around the globe to begin seed exchanges. In free time during his first year, Hebb went out into the Virginia mountains to collect seeds of native plants. "We published our own seed list and sent it to all the gardens I'd corresponded with," he recalled.

Seeds were sown, and volunteers nursed them along. The emphasis was on color - a "P.T. Barnum" effect, as Hebb told the Richmond Times-Dispatch in October 1987. Before long, Ginter was spiffy enough to host its first wedding.

"We decided it would be a good way to raise funds," Hebb said. He didn't count on a large black snake slithering between the bride and groom halfway through the ceremony.

"I thought, 'Oh, my gosh, this is probably the first and last wedding we'll ever have here.'"

It wasn't. Ginter now hosts about 100 weddings a year.

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Although Lewis Ginter is landlocked by Lakeside Avenue, Hilliard Road and the country club now known as Jefferson Lakeside, it will continue to expand and evolve during its next 25 years, supporters say.

The garden has forged partnerships for outreach projects, such as a Jackson Ward beautification effort funded by Capital One and Philip Morris, a Lakeside Business District revitalization plan run by Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Urban and Regional Planning and a healing garden at VCU Massey Cancer Center.

Creating memorable experiences for visitors is a standing goal, Robinson said. "We will continue to refine the gardens and collections," he said. "We have a real commitment to children, education and experiences in nature."

A floating bridge now under construction will give guests a more direct route to Bloemendaal House and the children's garden.

Ginter has snagged a world-class exhibit featuring the glass sculpture of Hans Godo Frabel that will run from April 2010 through January 2011.

Richmonders donate gifts big and small to Ginter, from buildings to books. Most of all, they give their time. Volunteer coordinator Darlene Van Laan's roster includes more than 600 people ages 13 to 80-plus who put in about 30,000 hours annually.

Hebb visits the garden frequently as a member and photographer.

"I often meet a number of plants that are familiar to me all the way back to the days when we got them as seeds," he said, sounding a tad like a reminiscent father.

On those visits, he thinks about the people who made it happen. "I know from the time I was there, that [people] was one of the most crucial things that made the garden grow," Hebb said. "And it took a heck of a lot of money.

"But it has happened quickly. Twenty-five years isn't that long."

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