



Rochester, The Flower City: Flowers and Gardens

Although Rochester was originally referred to as the “Flour City” because of its flour milling heritage, in 1859 its nickname became the “Flower City.” The name change was brought about by the efforts of the burgeoning nursery and seed industry, and are reflected everywhere in the city today.

The industry’s earliest pioneers include George Ellwanger and Patrick Barry. Their outstanding research and development in the nursery industry resulted in the Mt. Hope Garden and Nurseries becoming one of the largest nurseries in the world in 1840.

Half of all New York State’s nurserymen in 1855 were from Rochester. More fruit trees had been raised in Monroe County by 1856 than in the rest of the United States. And over one-third of the Rochester area was in nursery cultivation by the 1880's.

This legacy remains today, with magnificently-landscaped historic parks, and world-famous gardens and floral collections.

Highland Park

Established in 1888 as an arboretum on land donated to the city by Ellwanger and Barry, Highland Park was designed by famous landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (New York’s Central Park). This historically significant landscape features the world’s largest public lilac collection, a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Garden, a Poet’s Garden, an AIDS Remembrance Garden, and a Sunken Garden at Warner Castle.

The park is also noted for many other horticultural displays. In early May its flowering pears and tulips are in bloom; in mid-May the dogwoods and crabapples flower; and in late May the azaleas, horse-chestnut trees, pansies, spirea, wisteria, and tree peonies blossom.

Lilacs - Rochester’s most renowned garden is in Highland Park, located in the southeast section of the city. More than 1,200 lilac shrubs representing over 500 varieties are planted on 22 of the park’s 155 acres. This spectacular collection draws thousands of visitors each May during the city’s world-famous Lilac Festival.

Lamberton Conservatory - Located in Highland Park, the Lamberton Conservatory displays exotic flowers and foliage plants from around the world in lush tropical settings. Within the glass walls of the Conservatory are many plants that are not hardy outdoors in Rochester's temperate climate.

Under the Main Dome, a visitor will find the Tropical Forest Display, complete with an observation deck for "bird's-eye" viewing. Other climate-controlled rooms contain collections of exotic plants, desert plants, plants with economic uses such as banana and coffee trees, and house plants.

Among the popular attractions at the Conservatory are seasonal floral displays. Exhibits are changed five times throughout the year; the spring flower display is always a highlight for visitors to the Lilac Festival.

Rochester Civic Garden Center - A non-profit group chartered by the State University to provide horticulture information, the Center is located in Highland Park's historic Scottish-style "Warner Castle." The Castle's Sunken Gardens have recently been restored. Its facilities also include a 3,000 volume library and other display gardens: a Shady Border, a Rock Garden, a Courtyard Garden, an Iris and Daylily Bed, an Old-Fashioned Rose Bed, a Miniature Rose Bed, a Fern Bed, and a 13th Century Herb Garden. The front grounds feature many mature trees and a noteworthy collection of crabapples.

Pansy Bed - A Lilac Festival tradition since 1904, the pansy bed is located in the main lilac display area on Highland Avenue near Goodman Street. It contains 10,000 pansies, hand-planted anew every year by dedicated Monroe County Parks Department personnel. The oval floral "carpet" measures 20 feet by 50 feet, and each year the pattern is changed. The Pansy Display begins in early May and reaches its flowering peak in May and June.

Rhododendron and Azalea Collection - Highland Park's famous collection can be found in one of the park's sheltered valleys; the many varieties bloom from May into mid-summer. Rhododendrons, azaleas, mountain laurel, and andromeda thrive in the cool, moist atmosphere of the Rhododendron Dell. This narrow protected valley lies just east of the Highland Reservoir.

A modest but popular display in 1900, the Rhododendron Collection was significantly expanded by former Superintendent of Horticulture Richard A. Fenicchia. Today, Highland Park features nearly 700 specimens representing 175 species, varieties, or forms. The shrubs become ablaze with brilliant red, pink, orange, yellow, and white blossoms.

Tulip Beds - Located in front of the Lamberton Conservatory on the corner of Reservoir and South Avenues, this display of 15,000 hand-planted tulips is one of the park's most colorful gardens. In June the tulips are replaced with spectacular carpets of summer-blooming flowers that are cultivated in the park's own greenhouses.

Ellwanger Garden

A restored historic landscape, this beautiful site consists of a colorful perennial garden planted by George Ellwanger of world-famous Mt. Hope Nurseries in the 1800's. Rare peonies, tulips, and iris can be found here. The gardens are open to the public during the Lilac Festival in May and Peony Weekend in June. At other times of the year, the gardens are open by appointment only.

George Eastman House

Featuring Kodak founder George Eastman's restored mansion and four restored or adapted gardens (terrace, library, rock, and sunken west gardens); this historic 12.5-acre site is planted with over 300 historic varieties of perennials, bulbs, groundcovers, trees, and shrubs. Each February George Eastman House presents virtual springtime, with the two-week exhibition "The Dutch Connection: George Eastman's Conservatory in Winter Bloom." This colorful, interpretive exhibition features hundreds of flowering bulbs displayed in the Conservatory of the restored mansion, recreating Mr. Eastman's bulb orders for his home. Hyacinths, tulips, and orchids are a welcome treat for the eyes and nose in the midst of winter.

During Mr. Eastman's residency at the house between 1905 and 1932, he ordered tens of thousands of bulbs from Holland every year (except 1918, when a wartime coal shortage forced him to close his greenhouses) to decorate his conservatory. Large quantities were usually ordered, mostly tulips, narcissus, and hyacinths for indoor forcing, plus tulips for the outside beds.

Mr. Eastman's nostalgic annual bulb orders stemmed from a trip he made to Holland in 1890, when he was lured by the tulip fields while bicycling through the countryside. The present-day order includes hyacinths and tulips from B & K Flowerbulbs in Holland, formerly known as Baartman and Koning, the same Dutch bulb company used by Mr. Eastman.

Maplewood Park

Home of the annual Maplewood Rose Festival each June, this historic park displays more than 5,000 rose blossoms in 300 varieties during its summer blooming season.

Other City Gardens

Other local gardens of historic interest include “Woodside” at the Rochester Historical Society mansion on East Avenue, an enclosed perennial garden created in 1917, along with period garden structures.

The landscaped campus at the Rochester Museum & Science Center is near city center. With three formal gardens, the 12-acre landscaped campus showcases herbs, wildflowers, and changing annuals.

An early 19th-Century, 4.5-acre farmstead and tavern, the Stone Tolan House Museum displays a heritage apple orchard, heirloom perennials, vegetables, herbs, and native plants.

Sonnenberg Gardens

An historic Victorian Garden Estate and Mansion, Sonnenberg Gardens is the former summer home of Frederick Ferris and Mary Clark Thompson. About a 30-minute drive from Rochester, this 50-acre property features a 40-room stone mansion built in 1887, a Lord & Burnham conservatory, and nine theme gardens: Italian, old-fashioned, rose, rock, pansy, sub-rosa, moonlight, blue-and-white, and Japanese.

The gardens feature more than 20,000 annuals, 2,600 rose bushes, waterfalls, caverns, rock formations, wildflowers, and trees. They are open to the public May through October with guided tours available.

Genesee Country Village & Museum

Ten recreated historic gardens dot the landscape of this restored 19th Century village approximately a half-hour drive from downtown Rochester; they trace the evolution of the horticultural tradition in the Genesee Valley. On display is a rudimentary pioneer’s garden, as well as an elegant Victorian garden.

The village’s orchards, fruit, herb, and vegetable gardens furnish fresh produce for the village’s working kitchens. Also on site are the Nature Center, an area of ecological interest with native plants; the heirloom vegetable seed garden; and the Shaker garden of medicinal plants.

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