

It's Show Time

America's Best Idea becomes the Litchfield Garden Club's best inspiration for a flower show

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The Litchfield Garden Club didn't have to think long or hard about the theme for their upcoming flower show. Our national parks were a natural. Knowing that the national parks just celebrated their 100th anniversary in 2016 and uplifted by the Philadelphia Flower Show's tribute to the national parks last year, members of the Litchfield Garden Club rallied around that topic to motivate the creativity of their competition. Dedicated to a mission of education and conservation, what could be more appropriate than the country's national parks to ignite the artistry of entrants while reaching out and teaching the public? The result is Our National Parks – America's Best Idea, a Garden Club of America flower show to be held on June 9 and 10 at the Litchfield Community Center, open to the public with free admission on Saturday, June 10 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.



A vintage photo featuring President Theodore Roosevelt, who established the National Park system.

With such a lofty theme, this show promises to be an impressive opportunity to explore the natural beauty that is part of this country's heritage and applaud the nation's commitment to preserving our majestic wilderness. The garden club delved deep to think up truly thoughtful and meaningful content and classes of entry. The members labored long and hard to create a forum that will do our national treasures justice. Knowing that not everyone has the opportunity to explore the 59 protected habitats operated by the National Park Service, this show strives to bring their inspiration home. With typical Litchfield Garden Club zeal and commitment to the community, they are reaching out to bring their message to all their neighbors.

The topic is massive. And the first challenge was how to bring the visual essence of the parks to a local community center as a starting point to spark creativity. Diane Stoner, the club president, explained how the group found their "point of departure." Stoner vacations in her family house in Colorado with a view of Rocky Mountain National Park, plus she has visited several of our nation's parks throughout her life. She remembered a set of visually arresting WPA (Works Progress Administration) posters created during the Great Depression to employ artists. Through the program, artists were paid to produce posters that advertised public institutions - 35,000 posters resulted. As part of that project, screen printed posters of national parks were created. Most notably, artist Chester Don Powell and printer Dale Miller produced 13 riveting and memorable posters for national parks. After the WPA and the Federal Art Project that it fostered were shuttered in 1943, the artwork was lost. And then, in the 1970s, Doug Leen, a seasonal park ranger at Grand Teton National Park, discovered the trove. Ranger Doug, as he is known, began looking into releasing reproductions of the art. Eventually, after painstaking research into the original techniques, he reissued the posters (go to www.rangerdoug.com for more information). Diane Stoner remembers seeing those posters during her travels, and she took action, contacting Ranger Doug and asking permission to use the posters as inspiration for the show. Not only did he agree, but Ranger Doug and Diane Stoner met in person when she invited him to dinner at her family's Colorado vacation home. Apparently, it was a memorable juncture that distilled all that is iconic about parks, camping out, and those who love the wilderness, "He pulled into our driveway with his Airstream camper in tow," Stoner recalls. The two became friends. But beyond that personal bond, the Litchfield Garden Club got its muse.

Using the posters as catalysts to spark creative juices, they set up some truly inventive competitive classes for entry. Each design entry class refers to a national park and takes its cue from the plant life, features, and terrain unique to that park's personality. For example, when interpreting Crater National Park in Oregon, designers are asked to incorporate water into their creations. The lush colors and lupine meadow of Grand Teton National Park serve as hints of what those designs might hold in store. For Florida's Everglades National Park, the many protected species of imperiled plants are key to its personality, therefore, exhibitors are asked to work with fresh plant material.

Fascinatingly, these elements are distilled into presentations with a footprint that is approximately 10 to 18 inches square. And Hawaii's Haleakala National Park will undoubtedly inspire the use of tropical rarities in the entered designs. Plus, there's a class that stages the breakfast table where President Theodore Roosevelt met with John Muir to first hatch the idea of creating national parks in 1903.

And it doesn't stop there. For the horticulture classes, entrants vie for the best foxglove, peony, astilbe, Siberian iris, bearded iris, roses, alliums, lilies, as well as shrub and tree branches. In honor of Great Smoky National Park, there is a competition for the best heritage plant cultivated over five years under the entrant's care. Referencing Olympic National Park, contestants will vie for the finest outdoor planted trough. Meanwhile, in honor of Sequoia National Park, those who enter the challenge class have nurtured the dicey *Lupinus perennis* from seed.

But wait! There's more! This group took their theme to the photographic level as well. Entrants will submit monochromatic photos taken at national parks inspired by Ansel Adams' work. Another photo class urges entrants to document the human impact on national parks. To study specific plants, there is a class for photos of closeups taken at a national park. Some classes are limited to Litchfield Garden Club members. For other classes, contestants from any of the 200 GCA clubs (with a total membership of approximately 20,000 members) throughout the country are encouraged to send in entries. Closer to home (because Acadia in Maine is our closest national park), there is a competition for manipulative photographic techniques emulating the Impressionistic movement using photos taken at Weir Farm, the National Historic Site in Wilton.

To further their education initiative, the Litchfield Garden Club is composing a conservation exhibit discussing the sticky issue of the impact of public use versus preservation in parks. Are plants, wildlife, and quality of resources altered when people are encouraged to interact with our country's most beautiful natural phenomena? Come and decide for yourself, based on this exhibit. And the Litchfield Garden Club is also hosting an essay contest in partnership with the 6th grade of Litchfield Intermediate Public School, the subject being "Our National Parks-How Lucky We Are."

This Garden Club of America show promises to be an event that might prompt your next vacation, and make it more meaningful. Even if you are strictly an armchair traveler, this will be a vicarious trip across the country led by some of the most adept flower arrangers in the world. Ideas can be brought home. Club president Diane Stoner pointed out that the horticulture classes give wonderful hints at what is growing successfully in local gardens. Spoiler alert: She is composing a mass arrangement using only materials from her own prodigious garden for the event. She also promised that members will be on the floor to answer questions. Meanwhile, the group is getting truly psyched about their topic, watching documentaries about the national parks and even traveling to visit parks. Join in their ovation for America's Best Idea and come see the brilliance that it sparks. Our National Parks - America's Best Idea will be open to the public with free admission on Saturday, June 10 at the Litchfield Community Center from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Go to www.litchfieldgardenclub.org for more information.