

THE GRACE ARENTS GARDEN AT LEWIS GINTER BOTANICAL GARDEN



Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden blooms today as the result of a vision held by Grace Arents, the niece and heir of Lewis Ginter. Lewis Ginter, a successful businessman and entrepreneur, purchased land in 1884 to provide an area for “healthful recreational activities for the community”. Miss Arents, a nurse, had traveled in Europe and visited botanical gardens there. She nourished her love for horticulture and gardens through these visits. She also wanted to provide a “healthy environment for children suffering from crowded living conditions in the polluted areas of the city”; thus, she initially established a hospital for sick children on the Ginter property after she had acquired it upon her uncle’s death. When the hospital ceased functioning, Miss Arents chose to live in that residence which she named “Bloemendaal” or valley of flowers. Before her death in 1926, Grace Arents stipulated in her will

that the property should become a botanical garden named in honor of her uncle. Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden became a reality in 1984, and the area in front of Bloemendaal House was officially designated as the Grace Arents Garden.

In 1988 the Garden Club of Virginia chose the Grace Arents Garden at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden as a Restoration Project after having been approached by Lewis Ginter. This special garden area, comprised of 26,000 square feet and 1,200 square feet of floral beds, is situated in front of Bloemendaal House which is at the heart of Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

The restored garden, with design elements overseen by then GCV Landscape Architect Rudy Favretti was dedicated in 1990. Two original wooden arched arbors and a summer house were replaced. GCV has continued to provide guidance and support for the Grace Arents Garden under the guidance of current Landscape Architect Will Rieley.

Today Senior Horticulturist Elizabeth Fogel oversees the design and planting of these lovely garden beds. In this garden space Elizabeth, first and foremost, considers historically appropriate plants and appearance. The plantings are consistently more formal than those in other areas of the Garden and always include heirlooms. Elizabeth often uses more modern, improved varieties for disease resistance. As she prepares her designs for each season, she

“refers to list of bedding plants that were popular in the late Victorian Era.” This entails research on her part as no specific records of what Grace Arents planted exist.

The Grace Arents Garden has been an extremely popular site for weddings, large gatherings and other rental events. It thus needs not just to be beautiful but also needs to recover from wear and tear that comes from the above activities.

COVID has inordinately changed the dynamics at Lewis Ginter. With months of closure of the Garden, weddings and other rentals were drastically reduced. According to Elizabeth, “With our budget severely impacted, we looked for ways to cut costs while still creating a full display for spring 2021.” To address the dramatic reduction in income, Elizabeth did the following:

1. Reduced the number of types of bulbs so that she could order at bulk prices. So instead of the 25 cultivars ordered for 2020, she ordered 6 different cultivars and one pre-mixed blend containing 3-4 cultivars.
2. Spaced the above bulbs a bit farther apart and did not plant some of the peripheral areas of the garden.
3. Let some of the perennials that are normally moved to other areas of Lewis Ginter stay in place. This, too, kept the garden feeling fuller and thus Elizabeth was able to order fewer violas for the fall.
4. Plants to be planted for next summer will be “tried and true” plants that she believes will fill in well.



Today there are virtual tours of Lewis Ginter with links on the website. At this point there is not a specific tour of The Grace Arents Garden

Special events are still happening despite COVID. The Garden is open and had a successful Oktoberfest in the fall and the magical GardenFest of Lights over the holiday season. The impressive Darlington Oak was wrapped with lights that filled the night skies with magic.

Sue Thompson, GCV Restoration Committee Member, The Tuckahoe Garden Club of Westhampton