

“Can we create a garden out of lights?”
-Nancy Kartes, Garden Manager, Bellevue Botanical Garden

Bellevue Botanical Garden’s 25th annual “Garden d’Lights” event set to welcome 80,000 visitors

On November 30, Garden d’Lights, the dazzling holiday light show at Bellevue Botanical Garden (BBG) that has been enchanting visitors for 24 years, opens once again. From the grand opening until its closing on December 31, hundreds of visitors will walk through the world class botanical garden every night to find it filled with plants and creatures constructed out of more than half a million colored lights.

Garden d’Lights has become one of the highlights of the year at the Garden. This is not only because of its enormous popularity, but also because of the months of effort it takes to produce and host this beloved winter festival of color. In 2018, for instance, over 160 volunteers worked some 6,000 hours to design, build and install the show and then to welcome event visitors as greeters, cashiers and Trillium Store staff.

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It was just one question that started it all: “How do we get more people to come to the Garden in the winter months?” Nancy Kartes, now BBG garden manager asked back then. "Can we create a garden out of lights?" When she told Iris Jewett, one of the Bellevue Botanical Garden Society (BBGS) founders, about the idea, Jewett said, "That would be delightful." And so “Garden d’Lights” was born.

Kartes took the idea to the City of Bellevue and to the BBGS board. Member Barbara Baker Quinn helped with research and the initial designs. The concept was finally approved and plans for the first illumination began to unfold for winter 1994.

The project was a unique and special undertaking from the very beginning. Though many holiday shows featuring lights existed around the country in 1994, this event was the first to focus almost exclusively on replicating the flora and fauna of a magical winter garden in lights. There was no template or detailed plan to reference. Because the BBG is a place devoted to horticulture and education, however, making the creations as authentic and lifelike as possible was important.

That first year, an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 visitors came to see the first Garden d’Lights. By 2009, the number reached 160,000.

Through the years, much of the design and building of display pieces that is now truly a master craft, was a matter of trial and error. In the early days, lights were wrapped around sticks, grapevines, tomato cages, or whatever else anyone could think of that might work to create a

display. Not all these early structural materials withstood the test of time. Grapevines, for instance, tended to dissolve in the damp, so they were eventually replaced with tougher stuff, such as the rebar used today.

The process

The parallels between creating a garden and building Garden d’Lights are many. There is a planning phase, which starts almost immediately after the displays are taken down and stored. Then all through the year, volunteers sketch new ideas, create prototypes, take measurements and finally write building instruction sheets so that each flower or animal can be replicated again and again. These worksheets are vital guides for the volunteers who work during hundreds of display building sessions that take place almost all year long.

Much like growing plants from seeds, building plants (and animals) from lights requires knowledge, skill and enormous patience. One piece can take hours or even days to assemble depending on its complexity. A seemingly simple candelabra primrose, for example, takes an experienced builder about four hours to make.

Garden d’Lights volunteers interviewed for this article say that the creativity required is one thing that motivates them to participate in such a long and labor-intensive project. But the camaraderie is what most people say keeps them coming back. Working together side by side, week after week, with like-minded friends for the benefit of BBG is a tremendous bonding experience.

Planting the garden

Taking the display pieces into the Garden to be “planted” requires yet another series of careful preparation steps, including checking and rechecking plans and maps and confirming measurements. An outside electrical firm that specializes in complex events handles placing the electrical boxes in accordance with the design.

After the electrical work is safety tested, the team of volunteers begins the process of setting out the display vignettes. For 25 days, six days a week, volunteers go in groups of two or more to place the pieces in the Garden, install them securely and connect them to the electrical lines. At each step, workers assess the visual impact. It is not uncommon to add more color to an area to create balance or to enhance the beauty and impact of display arrangements.

The 2019 Garden d’Lights in bloom

According to current Garden d’Lights leaders, Candi McIvor and Cleo Raulerson, there are about half a million lights in this year’s display. Since no one has actually counted the lights, however, the number could be even higher.

One of the big changes that has occurred in recent years is the move to LED lights. Garden d’Lights now includes about three-quarters LED lights to just one quarter incandescent lights. While the LED lights are brighter, bulbs cannot be removed, so color changes are more challenging. In certain displays, the brightness of the LEDs can also be a distraction to the

overall design. Blending LED and incandescent lights together is often the solution to creating a desired effect.

With experience, the Garden d'Lights team has also learned to fashion smarter builds by making the structures easier to maintain. Some of the earlier animals, for example, had to be permanently retired because they could not be repaired. Plants and critters that are built today are designed so that they can be opened for servicing or repair. Ironically, the main reason they occasionally need repair is because real critters like to chew on them and sometimes even bite off the electrical plugs.

Winter weather issues are always a concern as well, note McIvor and Raulerson. Snow is not the biggest problem, however; it is wind. Structures are built to sustain normal wind, but if there are high winds, the event must be closed for safety reasons.

As every gardener knows, planting a few new things each year is a must. Accordingly, there are several new displays for 2019 including fawn lilies, "Midwinter Fire" dogwood, wisteria, hummingbird sage, and the newest critter, Slow-Mo the Snail. Given that it is a magical time of year, there is even a fairy door. This year, Snap d'Dragon will be making his appearance as will a beloved frog that has been rebuilt.

At the start of this 25th Garden d'Lights year, Bellevue Botanical Garden volunteers and staff are ready to welcome visitors for another spectacular season. "It warms our hearts," observes one volunteer. "Everyone involved knows we have a very good thing going. It is a privilege, a joy, to be able to share this with our community and other guests from farther away." [END]

Bellevue Botanical Garden is located at 12001 Main Street, Bellevue, WA. The Bellevue Botanical Garden Society is a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization that supports the Bellevue Botanical Garden. The mission of the Society is to perpetuate and further enhance the Bellevue Botanical Garden as a learning resource in partnership with the City of Bellevue.

For more information, please go to www.bellevuebotanical.org or contact the administrative office at 425-452-2750.