



# It's **SHOW TIME!**

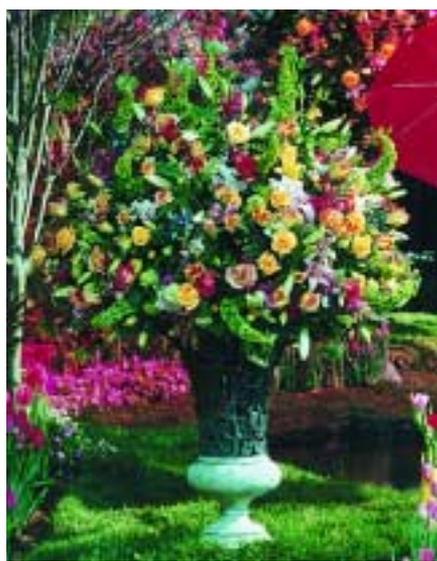
An American tradition, flower shows provide a foretaste of spring for winter-weary gardeners.

BY EVA MONHEIM

AS THE ESCALATOR carried me down to the show floor, the magical colors, fragrances, and sounds heightened my senses and quickened my pulse. I was a young girl at the time—oh, so many years ago—totally enthralled with the idea of going to my very first Philadelphia Flower Show. But the sensation of that first show has stayed with me through the years.

That feeling is a key part of the mystique associated with flower shows and helps explain why people are drawn to them year after year. “They give people a breath of spring and creative ideas for their gardens,” says Jane Pepper, manager of the Philadelphia show and director of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS).

Flower exhibitions and shows have deep roots in the United States, dating back to at least 1829, when PHS members



This sumptuous floral arrangement, above, and inviting poolside scene, top, were on display at the Philadelphia Flower Show last year.

held a flower exhibition in Philadelphia (see “Birth of An All-American Tradition,” page 43). That exhibition evolved into the Philadelphia Flower Show, which now attracts some 300,000 visitors each year and has been a significant influence on the development of other shows.

While Philadelphia can lay claim to the longest-running show, more than 30 other major flower and garden shows are held throughout North America each year between January and June. Each show has its own regional flavor and unique characteristics, but all offer a blend of the standard elements that attendees look forward to seeing each year: creative landscape exhibits, displays of the latest plants and gardening products, floral competitions, and educational offerings. There is something for everyone—from rank beginner to seasoned gardener.

## AHS FLOWER SHOW AWARDS

As part of its national mission, the American Horticultural Society has historically presented awards at flower and garden shows throughout the United States. Currently the Society offers two types of awards, the Environmental Award and the Bole Medals.

### ENVIRONMENTAL AWARD

The recently renamed Environmental Award (previously known as the AHS Citation Award) is given to flower show exhibits that best demonstrate a combination of skillful design and environmental excellence.

Criteria used to evaluate exhibits include the use of native plants; water conservation; providing habitats for wildlife; man's function within the design; and the function and context of the design in relation to the larger environment. The new name and revised judging criteria for the award were developed by AHS staff and Board members to better reflect the importance of environmental awareness within garden landscapes.

### BOLE MEDALS

A devoted amateur plant collector, Nancy Bole funded the creation of the Bole Medals in the hope of perpetuating and heightening the awareness of exemplary horticultural practices in plant collections.

The Bole medals are awarded in two categories based on the number of exhibit entries. The gold medal is presented to deserving individuals or groups who exhibit entries that represent meticulous horticultural practices of 15 different species or cultivars of cut flowers or container-grown plants. The silver medal is awarded to entries that include eight different species or cultivars.

For a complete list of shows that participate in the AHS award program, see the flower show listings in the *AHS Member Guide* or visit the AHS Web site at [www.ahs.org](http://www.ahs.org) and click on the link for the National Events Calendar.

Over the last few years, education has become a more significant aspect of these shows. Some—such as the one in Philadelphia and the Northwest Flower and Garden Show in Seattle—offer hundreds of lectures, presentations, and demonstrations.

Another important component of most garden shows is award presentations to exhibitors. Awards are a significant way to recognize exhibitors and competitors who represent horticultural excellence. As part of its national award program, the American Horticultural Society presents two different kinds of awards at flower shows (see the sidebar at left).

### THEME AND THEATRICALS

According to Jane Pepper, PHS director and manager of the Philadelphia Flower Show, coming up with creative themes year after year is one of the most critical elements for a successful show. The theme of this year's Philadelphia Flower

Show's (March 2–9), "Festival de las Flores," will pay special tribute to the significant Latin community in the Philadelphia region, but, Pepper says, "the color and excitement of the show will appeal to everyone."

Now in its 15th year, the Northwest Flower and Garden Show in Seattle is renowned for its entertaining format and lavish exhibits. The show's director, Duane Kelly, cites Pepper's work with the Philadelphia show as a major influence on his own style. This year, Kelly is taking theatrics to a whole new level by hosting a performance of *Betrothal*, a play by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Lanford Wilson during the Northwest show, which will be held February 19 to 23. Kelly, a member of the American Horticultural Society's Board of Directors, also coordinates the San Francisco Flower Show.

Show coordinators must use an ever-changing array of theatrical techniques to continually pull visitors to their events.



Among the exhibits at a recent Northwest Flower and Garden Show was this one by Shapiro Ryan Design for Monrovia Nursery titled "Westmoreland Place."



This colorful, whimsical display was featured at the Oklahoma Garden Festival.

Heather Griswold, event director for the Oklahoma Garden Festival Foundation—an Oklahoma City-based garden show supported by the Oklahoma Horticultural Society—says her show depends on the “wow factor” to attract and entertain gardeners and non-gardeners alike. The theme of this year’s show (January 30–February 2) is “Gardens Through the Ages.”

### LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Location, facilities, and timing are additional key ingredients that keep the millions of people attending shows each year. The Pennsylvania Convention Center—which houses the 10-acre Philadelphia Flower Show—is located close to mass transit at the heart of the city.

Like the Philadelphia show, the North-

west Flower and Garden Show is held in a region with a temperate climate that supports a variety of plants and gardening styles. The timing of the show—a couple of months before spring—makes it an ideal forum for specialty nurseries, landscape firms, designers, and landscape architects to showcase their work to an audience infected by cabin fever and eager to get a jumpstart on spring.

According to Griswold, the Oklahoma Garden Festival was spawned by the revitalization of downtown Oklahoma City. Major beautification projects and the addition of the cultural arts center were seen as great tie-ins with the flower show, which Griswold says is a “type of art form” that appeals to a broad audience. With new facilities and a re-energized downtown, Griswold is optimistic that tens of thousands of people will continue to flock to this major cultural and art event each year.

## BIRTH OF AN ALL-AMERICAN TRADITION

In 1829, 25 members of the fledgling Pennsylvania Horticultural Society gathered to show off their plant treasures from around the world. The exhibition was held in Philadelphia’s Masonic Hall, which at a modest 82 by 69 feet bears little comparison with the mammoth exhibition halls used for today’s flower shows. Among the plants displayed were magnolias, peonies from China, an India rubber tree, an Arabian coffee tree, and sugar cane from the West Indies. From that modest beginning sprang the Philadelphia Flower Show, now the largest indoor flower show in the world and arguably the oldest. By comparison, England’s renowned Chelsea Flower Show dates back only to 1913.

The Philadelphia plant exhibition was one of the first indications that the horticultural revolution of the 19th century was underway. The steady growth of interest in plants by both collectors and the general public during this period fueled the development of plant exhibitions and stimulated the formation of regional and national plant societies.

One of the next stages in the evolution of flower shows occurred in New England, where horticultural enthusiasts sought better ways to exhibit collections of individual plant genera. The earliest form of what came to be known as the “gardenesque” movement was seen in 1873 at an exhibition on Boston Common, when the Massachusetts Horticultural Society displayed a collection of rhododendrons and mountain laurels in a naturalistic setting. At a time when few people were able to travel far from their home towns—and before the advent of television—the gardenesque exhibits gave flower show attendees a vicarious sense of how plants look in their natural settings around the world. The attention to detail and creativity that was used in that period to re-create plant habitats influenced subsequent generations of flower show exhibitors and is still in evidence at major shows today.

Now stronger than ever, the garden show movement in America is a treasured tradition.

—E.M.

### GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

Without community support, flower shows would not exist, so successful shows channel money back into the communities that support them. For instance, proceeds from the Philadelphia Flower Show go to Philadelphia Green, an urban greening program.

Similarly, proceeds from the Oklahoma Garden Festival benefit greening programs for the city sponsored by organizations such as the Myriad Garden Foundations, Oklahoma City Beautiful, and the Oklahoma Horticultural Society.

In Seattle, the Washington Park Arboretum Foundation runs the preview Gala for the Northwest Flower and Garden Show. Revenue from this event supports the operations of Seattle’s 230-acre Washington Park Arboretum.

The popularity of flower shows is a testament to the growing desire of Americans to support the expansion of the gardening movement and continue an enduring national tradition. “Some people say they have been coming for 40 years with their mother,” says Pepper of the Philadelphia Flower Show.

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