**Attractions**

Meadowlark Botanical Gardens contains a wide variety of attractions that cater to dedicated environmentalists and casual tourists alike. Several events venues provide a perfect setting for any occasion against a backdrop of diverse flora and fauna in Northern Virginia’s most exquisite sanctuary. Visitors may appreciate nature in its various forms, and enjoy comforts both indoors and outdoors.

**Plant Collections**

Meadowlark’s unique gardens will appeal to anyone interested in engaging with nature, and are excellent subjects for botanical study. As the first garden in the Washington, D.C. area to implement the International Agenda for Botanical Gardens in Conservation, Meadowlark maintains a strong dedication to sustainable horticulture. In keeping with its conservation initiatives, Meadowlark maintains three distinct native plant collections, which function to educate the public about garden conservation collections and efforts. They will appeal to ornamental horticulturalists who might be concerned with sustainable gardening practices, as well as any appreciator of nature.

- **Potomac Valley Collection**
  The Potomac Valley Collection (PVC) is the Gardens’ largest collection. It is based on the biogeography and floristic composition of the Potomac River basin, of which Meadowlark is a part. The PVC contains flora from each corner of the 37,000 square meter Potomac Valley, including samples collected along the Shenandoah, Monocay, Cacapon, and Conocteague Rivers. The PVC serves as both a conservation effort to save endangered plant species in the region, as well as a catalog garden for the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority. The PVC is unique in that it includes native plant species according to our local biographical region, whereas the other two feature native plants that occur within our politically-defined state borders.

- **Virginia Native Tree Collection**
  The Virginia Native Tree Collection (VNC) is located in the far corner of the gardens, below the Hillside Gazebo approximately 10 minutes from the Visitor’s Center, and includes some of the state’s best nature trees traditionally used in home and property settings. The collection includes smaller native trees such as *Asimina triloba*, *Carpinus caroliniana*, *Chionanthus virginicus*, *Magnolia virginiana*, *Ostrya virginiana*, and *Quercus lyrata*. Paw Paw, Virginia’s first indigenous fruit, also grows in the VNC. This collection will appeal to ornamental horticulturalists, and does include selections arranged for aesthetic value. This particular collection is featured in Meadowlark’s Specimen Tree Program.

- **Virginia Native Wetland Collection**
  The Virginia Native Wetland Collection (VNW) is located in and around Lake Lena, a small wetland situated at the lowest elevation in the Gardens. This collection contains native trees such as *Betula nigra*, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, *Nyssa sylvatica*, *Platanus*
occidentalis, *Salix nigra, Taxodium distichum* that produce sycamore, black gum, river birch, willows, and sweet gum. The collection also boasts many of Virginia’s most southerly wetland shrubs and wildflowers. This collection is perhaps best appreciated in the summer months, when the wetland humidity is conducive to growth of aquatic plants. The VNW also functions as a habitat for much of Meadowlark’s wildlife, and is home to several aquatic animals and birds, including many species of snakes, frogs and fish, as well as many blue herons.

**Events Venues**

**The Visitor’s Center**

The Visitor’s Center opened in 1992 and functions as the entrance into the Gardens. It is currently home to a gift shop, botanical library, and large meeting space with a fireplace. The Visitor’s Center hosts a variety of camps, classes, and receptions.

**Atrium**

The Atrium opened in 1998 and is now considered one of the premiere elite events venues in Northern Virginia. It has a capacity of 270 people and is home to an exquisite White Garden with a flowing indoor rock creek. It originally gained notoriety for hosting many diplomatic events in the Washington, D.C. region and as a popular destination for visiting foreign officials. 90% of events in the Atrium are now weddings. Atrium events are catered by the internal catering group, Great Blue Heron Catering.

**Gazebos**

There is a gazebo on each of Meadowlark’s three lakes, and each is available for rent for events, with a capacity ranging from 50-120 people.

- The Lake Caroline Gazebo is the most commonly used events gazebo, and is noted for its 360-degree view of the gardens.
- The Azalea Woods Gazebo is in the most secluded part of the Gardens, surrounded by greenery.
- The Hillside Gazebo is atop one of Meadowlark’s largest hills and overlooks the entire landscape.

**Lilac Pavilion**

Meadowlark’s newest events venue is Lilac Pavilion, located in the open field in front of the Visitor’s Center. It is available for reservations seven days a week, and is meant for celebrations and gatherings. 80 people may fit under the pavilion roof, but an additional 200 may convene on the lawn. Additional seating may be provided.

**Holiday Lights Show**
Meadowlark’s “Winter Walk of Lights” which runs from October through January is Meadowlark’s most popular event. It features numerous trees wrapped high with nature-themed holiday lights and includes many software-driven features. It attracts over 100,000 visitors from across the region each year.

**Other Attractions**

**Korean Bell Garden**

Meadowlark’s Korean Bell Garden is the first of its kind in Western Hemisphere, and the first ever Korean Bell pavilion located on the east coast of the United States. It was conceived as a symbol of diplomacy between the United States and South Korea and was opened on June 27, 2010, the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Korean War. Several American and South Korean diplomats were in attendance. The pavilion features a bronze bell that is over two meters high and weighs three tons.

**Historic Log Cabin**

Located up the hill from Lake Gardiner, this historic log cabin was restored for public tours in 1998. It was built in 1755 and originally functioned as a refrigeration house for the Native Americans that once lived on the grounds.

Educational Programs

Sustainable Horticulture Course

Beginning in the spring of 2009, Meadowlark began offering a course entitled “Sustainable Horticulture” in conjunction with all campuses of Northern Virginia Community College. The course focuses on botanical and ecological training in traditional horticulture and includes lessons on native plants sustainability. It is offered as part of Northern Virginia Community College’s Horticulture Technology Program, which is a two-year program of study culminating in an Associate’s degree. The program has growing affiliation with Meadowlark, and now uses samples from the Gardens in laboratory exercises. The Gardens and Horticulture program also share instructors, who practice field work at Meadowlark and teach extracurricular programs at the park.

The program states as its goal to “create outstanding landscapes of innovative design, ecological stability, and biogeographic relevance.” It aims to address issues of modern ornamental arrangements, which often create aesthetically pleasing arrangements at the expense of the plants and environment. The course also examines Political Horticulture, which concerns ways in which botany is used to determine political boundaries.

Title 1 Programs

Since 2012, Meadowlark has been running programs for young students in underserved Title 1 schools in the suburban Washington, D.C. region. Meadowlark organizes field trips for these students, who come from impoverished and highly diverse areas that might not otherwise be afforded these opportunities. The programs provide students with activities that simultaneously enrich their interpersonal experiences with fellow classmates, and incorporate SOL-standard natural science material.

The program also helps to involve families, who serve as chaperones, and gives teachers a spring board for study to help students meet state requirements. Meadowlark assists in teacher training, curricular coordination, and financial assistance with transportation, as well as providing program instruction.

Other Activities Offered

Camp Grow

A program for children that runs during the summer and includes activities five days a week that include nature tours, lessons in botany, and physical education.

Roving Naturalist Program
Roving caters to aspiring naturalists of all ages (students range from elementary students to senior citizens). The program includes guided nature walks, hikes, canoe trips, kayak tours, night explorations, stream and pond studies, and live animal programs.

Biodiversity Education Classes

Initiated in 1999, this series provides opportunities to join wildflower and birding hikes, study Gaia theory, canoe in wetland marshes, and learn about invasive species and plant diversity. The program is taught by professors from botany programs at local universities, including George Mason University and Northern Virginia Community College.

Department of State

Meadowlark hosts training programs held by the Department of State to train elite diplomatic security service agents for visits to museums and gardens by foreign officials. The Gardens also hosts embassy staff, diplomats, and other members of Congress for social events.

Other

Meadowlark also holds various programs and classes in conjunction with Elder Hostel, Smithsonian Associates, gardens clubs, public schools and regional community centers.

History

Meadowlark Botanical Gardens was founded on land purchased by Gardiner Means, a Harvard University economics professor, and Caroline Ware, a social historian in 1934. Means and Ware, who were married, purchased 74 acres of land at the current site upon relocating to the Washington, D.C. area to serve as social security advisers to the Roosevelt administration and assist in authoring the New Deal.[1]

Means and Ware continued to live on the land as private residents for fifty years, breeding sheep dogs, farming wheat, and planting flower gardens on the grounds. In 1975, faced with the rapid suburbanization of Northern Virginia, Means and Ware, who were conservationists, [1][2] decided to turn their property into a privately-owned public park to avoid residential development. In 1980, as the park’s popularity rose, the property was acquired by the Northern Virginia Regional Parks Authority (NVRPA).[1] The NVRPA also purchased an adjacent 21-acre lot, expanding the park to its current size of 95 acres.

Throughout the 1980s, the NVRPA restructured the grounds, adding three lakes (including Lake Gardiner and Lake Caroline), the main gazebo, and several Potomac flower collections. The park officially opened to the public as Meadowlark Botanical Gardens in April, 1987.[1]

In 1992, the Visitor’s Center opened, including the current gift shop and botanical library. Following in 1998, [1] the Atrium, a premiere events facility, opened to private events and continues to operate as a major entertainment venue in the region.

Meadowlark’s current series of biodiversity education programs were conceived in 1999 as part of the Regional Native Plant conservation Program, [3][4] which emphasized the importance of biogeographic rather than political definitions of garden arrangements. This led to the creation of the park’s motto, “Integrity over exotic display,” [1][3] which is in keeping with its values of sustainable ornamental horticulture. The programs continue to operate, in conjunction with local camps and with the Northern Virginia Community College system. [4]