

Spring Flower Show



Dakota Sacred Hoop Walk

Honoring this land's Indigenous peoples

The Arboretum is located on the traditional, ancestral and contemporary lands of the Dakota people, who inhabited the area long before the Arboretum was conceived.

Around the Arboretum's 1,200 acres, there are clues that speak to the significance of this place among Indigenous peoples with geography that touches down in the cities of Chaska, Chanhassen and Victoria. The word "Chaska" means something akin to "First Born Son" in Dakota. The name Chanhassen is loosely translated as sugar maple, a significant staple in Dakota and Ojibwe culinary traditions.

Arboretum staff are working with Indigenous communities today to build a better future with gratitude and conscious evolution toward better land stewardship. One example is the Dakota Sacred Hoop Walk, an augmented-reality art installation (pictured). The Arboretum welcomes all who identify as Indigenous peoples to access the Arboretum through waived daily admission by calling 612-301-6775 for tickets. Learn more by scanning the QR code.



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Bennett-Johnson Prairie

Restoring natural areas

Before colonization, much of the Arboretum land was deciduous forest composed of oaks, elm, basswood, ash, maple, hornbeam, aspen and birch. In low-lying areas alongside forest, prairies and Lake Minnewashta, there were marshes containing wild rice, rushes, marsh-grasses and willows. Settlers and farmers in the 19th century cleared large swaths of forest and prairie for crop fields and livestock pastures, disturbing the native ecosystems and plants cherished by local tribes.

In its early days, the Arboretum and its donors established a 20-acre tallgrass prairie (Bennett-Johnson Prairie), and continual efforts against invasive species are helping the wetlands return to their natural state. Conservation work by the Arboretum over the years has helped restore hundreds of acres back to deciduous forest.

Today the Arboretum's Plant Conservation Program works to protect endangered Minnesota plants, while staff and volunteers maintain other native habitats, including the Johanna Frerichs Garden for Wildlife, Spring Peeper Meadow and the Grace B. Dayton Wildflower Garden.

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Supporters gathered for the Arboretum dedication Sept.6, 1958

The Early Years: 1908-1958

The Arboretum exists today because multiple groups of people were interested in the breeding and showcasing of hardy plants for Minnesotans. It was established in Carver County because that's where the University of Minnesota Fruit Breeding Farm started in Victoria in 1908, followed by decades of popular hardy fruit introductions, including apples such as Haralson.

The success of this horticultural epicenter was not lost on the Men's Garden Club of Minneapolis, which in 1956 approached the Minnesota State Horticultural Society with the idea of an arboretum. In 1958, a gift raised primarily by the Lake Minnetonka Garden Club funded the purchase of 160 acres of Berens family land — not far from the fruit farm, which loaned its equipment to help the founders create and maintain the new Arboretum.

Dr. Leon Snyder, head of the U of M Horticultural Science Department and a major figure in the Arboretum's founding, became the first director with a vision to create a living collection that would have "landscape value," hence the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum name.

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Visitors sign up for Arboretum memberships, circa 1963

Planting and breeding: 1959-1979

The Arboretum continues to be an industry leader in the fruit and woody landscape breeding spaces. Alongside the slow work of breeding, the building out of the Arboretum began in this era:

- 1960** U of M researchers and students begin planting thousands of trees, shrubs, daylilies, peonies and yuccas as well as an azalea test garden to breed new cold-hardy deciduous azaleas.
- 1963** Staff start giving tours and selling memberships to the public for the first time.
- 1970-71** Gardeners plant chrysanthemums and ferns while also maintaining all of the newly planted tree collections, later adding the dahlia test plots and the Iris Garden.
- 1974** After years of construction, the Leon C. Snyder Building, the Arboretum's first major structure, opens as a research, education and visitor center, including the Andersen Horticultural Library, giftshop, tea room and event space.
- 1978** The Arboretum's azalea breeding program releases the first Minnesota-hardy azalea, a pink variety called 'Northern Lights'.

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Arboretum staff gathered for a photo in 1984 (Can you spot former Director Peter C. Moe?)

Delving into design: 1980s

During this era, Arboretum gardeners and horticulturists were busy creating the grand designs of the gardens on the hillsides behind the Snyder Building and not-yet-built Oswald Visitor Center.

- 1980** A new Hosta Glade replaces the original collection, which is now the Grace B. Dayton Wildflower Garden. The Meyer-Deats Conservatory officially opens.
- 1981** The first spring Plant Sale is held. This year's sale is May 10-11, 2024.
- 1982** The Wilson Rose Garden, Annual Garden and Dwarf Conifer Collection are completed.
- 1983** The Marion Andrus Learning Center opens to house the Arboretum's expanding education programs, which are still robust and successful to this day.
- 1984** The Japanese Garden (Seisui Tei "Garden of Pure Water") is dedicated. The Perennial Garden and Herb Garden are completed.
- 85**
- 1986** The Home Demonstration Garden is completed.

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Arboretum fruit breeders David Bedford and James Luby introduced the Honeycrisp apple in 1991 at the Horticultural Research Center

Home of the Honeycrisp: The 1990s

With the introduction of the Honeycrisp apple in 1991, this was the era that put the Arboretum on the map. The Arboretum's Horticultural Research Center has so far introduced 29 apples, including top favorites such as SweeTango, Zestar and First Kiss, along with many other fruits, woody plants and perennials.

1991 The Honeycrisp apple is introduced.

1992 'Minnesota Strain' redbud is released.

1995 The Frontenac grape is released.

1996 The Pillsbury Shade Tree Exhibit, Clotilde Irvine Sensory Garden and Nelson Shrub Rose Garden are completed.

1999 The first wines made from Frontenac grapes are released, launching the local cold-climate wine industry, which later welcomed other grapes such as Frontenac blanc and gris, Marquette, Itasca and Clarion.

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The Tashjian Bee and Pollinator Discovery Center opened in 2016 (Photo by Steve Silverman)

Eco-friendly architecture: 2000-2018

The opening of the Oswald Visitor Center in 2005 was a pivotal moment for the Arboretum. This 45,000-square-foot center became one of the largest public buildings in Minnesota to use eco-friendly geothermal heating and cooling. Connected to the historic Snyder Building by an elegant skyway, the center greatly expanded the Arboretum's cafe, catering facilities, event spaces, classrooms, offices, gift store, lobby and art galleries.

The Tashjian Bee and Pollinator Discovery Center (pictured) opened in 2016 and won a sustainable design excellence award from the American Institute of Architects. Special features include a metal roof, long-life Accoya wood cladding, geothermal radiant heating and cooling systems and solar panels. This center has become a beloved destination for all ages, focused on the key role that pollinators play in the ecosystem, all brought to life through an apiary, a honey house, learning spaces and pollinator gardens with interpretive signage.

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The Farm at the Arb opened in 2019 (Photo by Jason Boudreau-Landis)

The Farm at the Arb: 2019

The Farm at the Arb officially opened in 2019, showcasing the Arboretum's restored Red Barn, creating an iconic destination and event space to connect people with the food they eat through interpretive gardens and exhibits highlighting Minnesota-grown crops, fruits and vegetables. The Farm at the Arb Apprenticeship Program provides hands-on technical training to adults who want to go into careers in local food production or community health.

Also in 2019, the Arboretum completed its Three-Mile Walk by adding a final section of paved walkway between the Maze Garden and the Rhododendron Collection — as well as a new Buuck Farm Trail in 2021, which leads from the walk to the Farm at the Arb.

Today the farm is a hub of activity with its own entrance used by class participants and event-goers. Every year, Field Fest draws more than 1,000 people to celebrate harvest season, including the chance to dig up the largest sugar beet for a prize.

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The McQuinn Horticulture and Operations Headquarters opened for staff only in 2020 (Photo by Jason Boudreau-Landis)

Investing in staff and education: 2020-2024

In early 2020, Arboretum staff cheered the official opening of a new McQuinn Horticulture and Operations Headquarters, a 12,000-square-foot much-needed homebase for the horticulture, curatorial and mechanical staff at the Arboretum, who maintain 1,200 acres of Arboretum plantings and natural areas.

In 2023, yet another addition came to the Farm at the Arb with the Burton & Virginia Myers Education Center, providing a home for the Education team offices and a statewide headquarters for the University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program. It's also home to a state-of-the-art Kitchen Classroom with programming that uses food from the farm and a new 5,000-square-foot Foodscape.

What's next? The Arboretum is looking ahead to Carver County's Arboretum Area Transportation Plan, which will result in a new Arboretum's entrance — with a stoplight! — at Highway 5 and Minnewashta Boulevard in the coming years.