

# Taking a Mid-Atlantic road trip? Stop at these native plant gardens along the way.

By Amy Brecount White

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Last October, as I approached the two-acre meadow at the Delaware Botanic Gardens, I had to grin at the improbable cotton-candy clouds of pink muhly grass. I'm still amazed that this airy pastel plant is native to the Mid-Atlantic. In 2020, I had planted some muhly grass along my front sidewalk, not really knowing what to expect. The meadow's grass was probably planted a year or so ahead of mine, which means I can anticipate similar pink clouds wafting above my yard this autumn.

That's one of the reasons I love to tour gardens across the Mid-Atlantic: They help me to reimagine my little pocket of our ecosystem. Like many across the region who are turning to native plants and trees, I'm trying to boost my environment by choosing species that support pollinators and birds instead of annuals and shrubs that were introduced from other habitats. That motivation fires me up, and my desire for sensory inspiration leads me to explore our regional gardens, many of which feature native varieties.

As we resume road trips across the Mid-Atlantic, it's easy to plan a refreshing and informative stop or two at these eight lush regional gardens.

## **Delaware Botanic Gardens**

This garden features multiple habitats, including a sunny meadow, shady woodland and a blooming rain garden that filters the runoff from its parking lot. No effort toward incorporating native plants is too small to be impactful, says horticulture director Stephen Pryce Lea. "If you encourage your neighborhood and your friends and family to do the same thing, we can create a patchwork of native gardens across North America, which will be incredibly rewarding."

Unlike many other regional gardens, this one didn't originate with a land donation from a wealthy patron. Instead, a group of visionary volunteers decided that southern Delaware needed a horticultural education center with a native plant focus and started putting the pieces together. The rural site is a perfect stop on the way to the Delaware beaches.

Renowned landscape designer Piet Oudolf — who also designed the gardens of New York City's High Line — accepted the group's call to design the meadow using mostly native plants. Last November — with Oudolf's guidance — this garden added a whopping 84,000 spring-blooming bulbs, which will explode into a profusion of color this spring, along with providing some early-season nectar and pollen for the beneficial insects emerging from winter.

## **Patterson Park Audubon Center**

The National Audubon Society has become a major advocate for native plant gardening. In Baltimore, the local chapter uses the 155 acres of Patterson Park — which includes two native gardens, a lake and playing fields — as an outdoor classroom. More than 200 bird species have been spotted in the park. “It’s really the insects that are the critical link between plants and birds and the rest of the food web,” says Erin Reed Miller, the center’s senior coordinator for bird-friendly communities. “And native plants are the only way we’re going to have insects.” The center offers both in-person and online courses on native gardening to support birds, along with monthly birding tours in Patterson Park and [Druid Hill Park](#), which is home to the [Maryland Zoo](#).

### **Waterfront Walks: Native Plant Gardens**

Visitors to Baltimore’s Inner Harbor will find many of its signature attractions dotted with native plant gardens. The largest starts at [Rash Field Park](#) and the vegetation winds past the [Maryland Science Center](#) to the [National Aquarium](#). Following that path, you’ll pass through play areas in Pierce’s Park and arrive at the butterfly way station at Lancaster Street. You’ll see pollinator gardens and patches tucked into smaller areas, a shady golden ragwort forest, a stream and floating wetlands that help to support fish and crabs. Nearby, you can grab lunch or dinner, then picnic while you watch turtles basking in the sun. The gardens both lure and nourish pollinators while their roots filter water for a healthier harbor.

Leanna Wetmore, manager of neighborhood programs for the city’s [Waterfront Partnership](#), encourages visitors to focus on the beautiful colors and textures of plants, such as the native iris and wild indigo, rather than just expecting showy blooms. “No plant blooms all the time,” she says.

### **Mt. Cuba Center**

Just off Interstate 95 near the Pennsylvania-Delaware border, Mt. Cuba Center isn’t far from [Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library](#) and the expansive [Longwood Gardens](#). All are stunningly beautiful and bloom-filled, but each has a different focus. Mt. Cuba’s is managing its more than 1,000 acres sustainably, supporting scientific research and educating the public about native plants. The gardens near the Colonial Revival-style main house are formal and symmetrical. As those plants age, the center replaces them mainly with natives, in keeping with its philosophy.

Dorothy Leventry, the center’s director of education, hopes visitors will be inspired to try native gardening at home. “Don’t get analysis paralysis,” she says. “Get a plant in the ground as the first step.” Leventry recommends planting golden alexander and swamp milkweed for the instant gratification of watching the caterpillars they attract.

### **Adkins Arboretum**

Located 25 miles east of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, this 400-acre native garden and arboretum is an easy detour as you head into the Eastern shores of Maryland and Virginia and toward many Delmarva beaches. Its buzzing pollinator, rain and children’s teaching gardens — along with five miles of paths — focus on how to sustain the health of the Chesapeake area and highlight plants native to the Mid-Atlantic coastal plain. The trails wind through native forests, meadows and a wetland. Stop by the visitor center to find out what’s blooming and pick up one of two audio tours. The first includes 35 stops at which you’ll hear about plant communities and ecology. The second, “A Journey Begins: Nature’s Role in the Flight to Freedom,” explores the connections between the natural landscape and the Underground Railroad. The arboretum offers naturalist-led tours on the first Saturday of the month, along with monthly themed tours.

### **State Arboretum of Virginia at Blandy Experimental Farm**

If you’re heading into Virginia’s countryside or mountains, this facility — which is part of the University of Virginia — will provide a welcome transition with more than 700 acres to explore. While the environmental challenges we

face can feel overwhelming, says Carrie Whitacre, assistant curator of the herbaceous gardens, “gardening with native plants for pollinators and wildlife is an actual contribution to our environment that anybody can do.”

In the pollination garden, Whitacre showcases plants you can find at your local garden center, including native sunflowers, asters and goldenrods. Blandy’s gardens also model and recommend planting both nectar and host plants to support the developmental stages of pollinators. Seeing such eco-friendly — and enticing — gardens and wooded areas can help us reevaluate our preconceptions about what makes an outdoor space attractive, Whitacre says. “If we relax our expectations a little and make them more about what’s happening in the landscape — what animals are using your garden, what insects — that can go a long way with not being so overly concerned with the perfect manicured lawn and garden,” she says. “It’s okay if you have plants that are eaten by caterpillars. That’s the goal.”

### **Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden**

Just north of Richmond, these 50 acres of gardens can be a welcome respite after battling traffic. Several of the garden’s latest projects concentrate on refurbishing designated areas with native plants: The new strip of native flowers and grasses that lines part of Lake Sydnor near the Children’s Garden includes phlox, swamp milkweed, rattlesnake master, asters and other plants to support pollinators, helps address drainage issues and filters the water. The garden followed the recommended practice of not cutting back the fall garden, but leaving it until spring as a winter habitat for wildlife and insects.

The site’s summer theme is “Pollinator Power,” and an abundance of nectar and host plants for pollinators have been planted. Its popular “Butterflies Live” exhibit, which closed during the pandemic, will reopen April 16 and run through Oct. 10.

### **Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens**

Northwest of Philadelphia, you can find respite and inspiration in this 48-acre space that focuses on education and conservation. Its paths meander through multiple habitat settings, including valley, stream and pond. The gardens are home to an important collection of plants in the heath family, including native and nonnative rhododendrons and azaleas, along with blueberries, mountain laurel and others, some of which are rare. Visitors can look online to find what blooms to look for. A garden shop offers more than 300 kinds of plants, including native azaleas, houseplants and perennials.

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## **If You Go**

### **Adkins Arboretum**

12610 Eveland Rd., Ridgely, Md.

410- 634-2847

[adkinsarboretum.org](http://adkinsarboretum.org)

This 400-acre preserve features plants native to the Chesapeake region and includes five miles of trails through meadows, forest and bottomland. Guided walks, classes and seasonal native plant sales offered. Visitor center open Tuesday to Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday noon to 4 p.m.; closed Monday. Grounds open daily sunrise to

sunset. Admission \$5 per adult, \$2 ages 6 to 17, and free for 5 and under.

### **State Arboretum of Virginia at Blandy Experimental Farm**

400 Blandy Farm Lane, Boyce, Va.

540-837-1758

[blandy.virginia.edu](http://blandy.virginia.edu)

This 712-acre farm and arboretum are University of Virginia research facilities that offer guided walks and classes, a pollination garden and a half-mile native plant trail. Open daily dawn to dusk. Free.

### **Delaware Botanic Gardens at Pepper Creek**

30220 Piney Neck Rd., Dagsboro, Del.

302-321-9061

[delawaregardens.org](http://delawaregardens.org)

Featuring a mainly native, two-acre meadow, this 37-acre site includes a rain garden, a shoreline refurbished with native plants, an oak grove and woodland gardens. Open Thursday to Sunday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Guided tours at 10 a.m. Admission \$15 for adults. Guided tours \$10 per person and free for ages under 16.

### **Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens**

631 Berwyn Baptist Rd., Devon, Pa.

610-647-8870

[jenkinsarboretum.org](http://jenkinsarboretum.org)

This 48-acre space features native plants, walking trails and a wildflower garden. Grounds open daily, but hours vary seasonally; check [website](#). Garden shop and education center open daily 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Free.

### **Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden**

1800 Lakeside Ave., Richmond

804-262-9887

[lewisginter.org](http://lewisginter.org)

This 50-acre garden includes a classic conservatory, a children's garden, a farm garden and a treehouse, along with a cafe and a teahouse. Courses offered on-site and online. Open daily 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission \$14 per person ages 13 and up, \$11 seniors 65 and over, \$10 military, \$8 ages 3 to 12, free children under 3.

### **Mt. Cuba Center**

3120 Barley Mill Rd., Hockessin, Del.

302-239-4244

[mtcubacenter.org](http://mtcubacenter.org)

This more than 1,000-acre site and research facility features walking paths through native gardens and more than two miles of trails, including a pollinator loop and wildflower loop. Courses, self-guided walks and group tours available. Open Wednesday to Sunday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. from April to November. Admission \$15 per person, \$8 ages

6 to 17, and 5 and under free.

### **Patterson Park Audubon Center**

27 S. Patterson Park Ave., Baltimore

410-558-2473

[patterson.audubon.org](http://patterson.audubon.org)

Patterson Park, which provides an outdoor classroom for the center, includes a wetland garden and a sun garden. It offers bird-friendly gardening workshops and birding tours. Open daily year-round. Activities free, but may require registration.

### **Waterfront Walks: Native Plant Gardens**

Inner Harbor, Baltimore

443-743-3308

[bit.ly/waterfront-walks-baltimore](http://bit.ly/waterfront-walks-baltimore)

Installed by the Waterfront Partnership of Baltimore, this series of native gardens meanders along the Inner Harbor to showcase plants in different habitats. Don't miss the butterfly way station, the interpretive signage or the sunbathing turtles. Open daily year-round. Free.

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### **PLEASE NOTE**

Potential travelers should take local and national public health directives regarding the pandemic into consideration before planning any trips. Travel health notice information can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's interactive map showing travel recommendations by [destination](#) and the CDC's [travel health notice webpage](#).