

TRAVEL

Fernwood Botanical Gardens impresses master gardeners

BY SANDIE PARROTT
SPECIAL WRITER

The Master Gardener Society of Oakland County recently visited Fernwood Botanical Gardens, located on the banks of the St. Joseph River in Niles, Mich.

The tour of the nature preserve and gardens was led by the writer on a beautiful fall October day. The Master Gardeners were able to view some of 2,000 species and cultivated varieties, hike along some of the many trails and see some of the wildlife peeking through the vegetation, two hours before the general public and while the light was best for pictures.

Steve Bornell, the head of the horticultural department there, also took us on a general walking tour. One of the rules — no picking of plants, leaves and flowers, without permission — was very hard for the group to obey.

A little history

On July 5, 1941 Kay and Walter Boydston purchased what is now called Fernwood. Walter suggested the name of Fernwood because Kay loved ferns and he felt they would grow well on the property.

The Boydston Winter House still exists (in a bit of disrepair) on the grounds. Kay wrote many garden books, which included her own drawings. She wrote these books from a tiny room in

the house that still holds many of her original belongings. To read more about the gardens and their development, purchase the book *Reflections, Portraits of Fernwood in Four Seasons*, by Kay Boydston.

In order to preserve Fernwood for future generations, Mary Plym purchased Fernwood in 1984. In October of the same year the gardens were opened to the public. In 1985 a 66-acre arboretum was added to the gardens. Also in 1985 Warren Herbert Wagner, a world-renowned fern expert, was hired to develop Fernwood as a public garden. Additional land was acquired in 1989 and 1975.

These acquisitions brought Fernwood to the 105 acres it has today.

The Gardens

Everyone's style, from formal to natural woodland, could be satisfied by the many diverse gardens of Fernwood. There is a wonderful herb garden designed in a medieval style with a traditional stone dovecote situated at its center. The historical way of drying herbs is demonstrated with fragrant bundles tied to its rafters. The north and south vista gardens are long, undulating borders of colorful perennials, rustic garden furniture and blooming shrubs.

An excellent feature of Fernwood is that all of the plants and trees are labeled. The labels



In the garden: Doves make their home in this stone dovecote, and herbs are also dried there.

helped the Master Gardeners with their homework assignment. Martha Ferguson, the Extension Program Coordinator for the MSU Extension Office of Oakland County, had asked us to locate a plant for possible planting in our own yard. We were required to look up the care of the plants and share a chosen plant and its care with the other gardeners.

There is also a ravine and rock garden adjacent to the Boydston Winter House that was one of the first gardens planted. The stream that runs through the ravine also travels through a wonderful picturesque water wheel.

Of course there are ferns. A fern trail running along a trickling stream was supposed to be filled with ferns and wildflowers; but unfortunately October wasn't the best time for visitors to see the ferns. There was also a

small fern conservatory attached to the visitor's center, which holds many interesting and even rare species.

Japanese, Children's Discovery, wildflower, sensory, boxwood, tall grass prairie, arboretum and a lily pond are some of the other gardens and areas available for exploration.

The Trails

Fernwood has many diverse trails wandering throughout the property. The ecology trail provides a nice overview of the preserve's natural communities. Wooden panels along the trail describe the plants and animals living in the area. The trail includes natural springs, small streams, ponds, a marsh and the river. The ecology trail is well marked and relatively easy to traverse. It has charming wooden bridges and steps that blend into the natural setting. Some of

the other trails are more primitive and difficult to follow especially since, during our visit, they were covered with leaves.

The gardens are open during the green season, (April through October), 10 to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, and noon to 6 p.m. Sunday.

During the winter (November to March) they are open, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday, and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday.

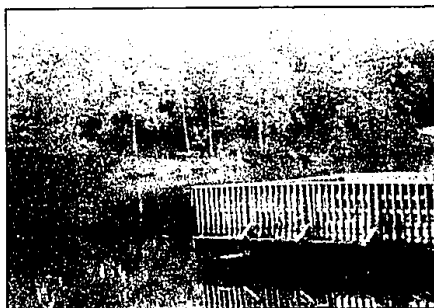
Admission prices are: adults \$4, seniors \$3, students ages 13-19 \$2, children 6-12 \$1 and children under 5 are free.

Fernwood also has a nice cafe, and a lovely gift shop. That is, if they have replenished their supply of gifts and art after the Master Gardeners visited. Additionally, plants of some limited

varieties grown in the gardens can be purchased from the gift shop.

Fernwood Botanical Gardens and Nature Preserve is a wonderful place to take the family or a group of gardening friends. Their mission is very appropriate to today's world, "To enrich the lives of all people by stimulating the appreciation of nature, exemplifying harmony between people, plants, gardens and wildlife, and using the distinctive natural and cultivated habitats known as Fernwood."

Their location is only about a 3-1/2 hour drive from Pontiac and well worth the trip. Plan for at least four hours to see all of the garden areas. My plan is to return several times to see the gardens in all seasons.



Reflections: The colorful leaves of fall are reflected in the St. Joseph River at Fernwood Botanical Gardens, which is open year round.

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