

GROW-ZONE

A Quarterly Journal Review of our Seasons

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It's A Full House... A Full Greenhouse!

Each spring, our greenhouse becomes increasingly harder to walk through. Our staff put a lot of effort into propagating both perennial and annual plantings to add to the gardens. To propagate new plantings of the highest quality, the greenhouse managers look for optimal “mother plants” to take cuttings or seeds from. Mother plants are typically the individuals from the crop with the best overall health, as this usually indicates resistance to pests & other environmental factors. We have achieved a wide variety of Coleus, an annual plant, in this fashion thus limiting our need to purchase new potentially inferior plants. Over the years, we have been progressively using our own stock to collect seeds from and propagate for the next season. This past season, about 75% of the plants that went into the ground were from what we had propagated ourselves or nursed as plugs for more than a year, including our vegetable crops. Incredibly, all of the annual plantings make it into the ground within 2 weeks of leaving the greenhouse. Our staff has it down to a science at this point.

As we near the end of May, many of the plants that have spent the winter and spring in the greenhouse are moved outdoors under shade screening (see photo to the right) to adapt to their environment before being planted in the ground. This can be crucial for the success of the plants - they may be unable to survive the elements if they have not had a chance to acclimate, especially with our variable weather patterns near Lake Michigan.





The Monsoon Season of 2024

We experienced an incredibly rainy spring season that persisted into the summer, which really tested the reliability of our swale systems. Our swales prevent water from pooling throughout the gardens, working to channel excess water to our ponds or underground culverts. You can see the very full bioswale in the top right photo, diverting excess water to an underground perforated pipe system, which slows and filters water on its way out to Lake Michigan. You can also see one of the rock swales carrying water into a drain culvert system in the bottom left photo. While the weather helped the spring plantings stay quenched, it also tested our staff. In the bottom right photo, notice our arborists up to their shins in rainwater, deliberating over a downed tree near the Farm House following a storm at the end of June.

Many of our staff joked about the weather finally “evening out” due to the stark difference between the last two growing seasons – last year we endured a lasting drought, forcing us to use irrigation constantly. This year, we barely had to turn on our irrigation until the last few weeks of July!



Though our Pumpkin Hill Garden was drenched this season, the pumpkins thrived in it. On average, one pumpkin plant needs at least 1 gallon of water each week!



Vegetable Gardens

In the weeks around Memorial Day, our vegetable gardens fill in quickly. There are a few crops that we order in trays of plugs, such as tomatoes, peppers and artichokes. But the vast majority, about 85%, of the crop plants are grown from our own stock and/or sown from seed. Each year we keep some of the healthiest potatoes as next year's plugs. We sow pumpkin seeds, corn, beans and more! Using raised beds has proven important for us, as we are so near to the lake. The soil in the raised beds is a few degrees warmer than in-ground beds, allowing us to plant our crops a little earlier.



In the top right photo, you can see a few of the raised beds in the Pumpkin Patch Garden, the largest vegetable garden on the property. Along with drip irrigation lines, the most important factor when it comes to crop yield is having the right soil composition. Each year we add new nutrients to all of the garden beds, in the form of compost and sometimes worm castings. Even with these efforts, some particular crops, like tomatoes and peppers, still need to be fertilized throughout the growing season to yield the best results. Each vegetable is different, and have varying needs, which can be affected by changing weather patterns.

New Challenges Each Season

Each growing season presents its own set of variables, dependent on weather and other environmental factors. For instance, we experienced a constant supply of rain through May and June but launched into a humid, dry spell in mid-July. The amount of rain and cooler temperatures early in the season could be responsible for the lack of pepper plant growth we noticed. We've also seen powdery mildew and tomato blight in abundance this year, likely due to these conditions. Luckily, these weather patterns do not favor certain garden insects, and we experienced one of the best cauliflower harvests in years due to the limited cabbage moth pest activity!



2024 Bluebird Season Review

When we partnered up with the Sheboygan County Cancer Care Fund's "Survive, Thrive & Be Fit" group to create a Bluebird Trail in the gardens in 2023, we were hopeful that we would see bluebirds using the 12 new birdhouses right away. What we later realized was that we missed the timing of the bluebirds's arrival during their spring migration, and by the time we got the birdhouses in place, it was about halfway through their nesting season. While we did see a plethora of house wrens taking up residence in the houses last summer, we were all a bit disappointed to see a lack of bluebirds. This season, the houses were ready when the bluebirds started arriving and looking for territory. This made a notable difference, as we saw 5 of the 12 birdhouses successfully fledge bluebird chicks throughout the nesting season, sometimes even being used for a second clutch!



A Bluebird sits atop birdhouse #9.



Five Bluebird eggs rest in a grass nest.



Thank you!



A Bluebird parent refuses to leave her babies.



Five Bluebird chicks overflow their nest.

Once a week during the months of March – August, a volunteer walks the Bluebird Trail to observe the area around each birdhouse, along with checking inside each house to collect data regarding the nest type, species, # of eggs/chicks, etc. At the end of the nesting season, this information is uploaded to a state-wide database which can offer insight into the bluebird population, and whether efforts like these are helping this species. It would certainly seem that the efforts of the Survive, Thrive & Be Fit volunteers increased our local bluebird population, as we counted at least 18 chicks successfully fledged from the Bluebird Trail this season!



Tree Plantings & Removals

Tree planting continued into the month of May and beyond for our team of arborists. In the photo to the right, you can see Spencer and Alyssa planting a new spruce tree into what was once a mound of compost, turned into a hillside garden.

In the photo below, you can see Mike Scharl reconstructing a garden bed outside the Farm House, after a few Ornamental Pear trees were removed. They were later replaced with evergreens.



New Pathways

As projects continue to evolve throughout the gardens, especially on the newer, west side of the property, new pathway construction is necessary. Below, Mike Prah, our hardscape specialist, installs a new gravelled pathway between the Da'vine Garden and Pumpkin Hill Garden to increase accessibility.



Summer Visitors

Summer is a popular time to visit the gardens. Various groups enjoy the events, guided tours and educational programs that we host throughout the season. We unfortunately had to move the June-A-Palooza fundraiser for Meals on Wheels to their location at the last moment due to excessive rainfall and washouts throughout the gardens. Registered guests were offered access to the gardens on a day in Fall, hopefully with better weather. We had home schools and summer camps arrive with busloads of children in June & July. We also saw many adult garden clubs from across the state enjoying guided garden tours and the accompanying summer blooms.



Paris-themed June-A-Palooza centerpieces



YMCA's Camp Y Koda kids visit the Nature Studies Center

Educational Interpretation

We have been working to increase the educational signage in key locations throughout the gardens, to offer visitors more information on the significance of each area. For example, we recently added an interpretation board in our Hop Yard Garden. The panels in this kiosk highlight the history of hop growing in Wisconsin, as well as our partnership with the local Sheboygan brewery, 3 Sheeps Brewing Co.



Phenology - “the study of cyclic and seasonal natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life.”

Date: May 14, 2024

High Temp: 54; Partly Cloudy

Notes: Lilacs are blooming around the gardens; Japanese Maples are fully leafed out



Date: May 31, 2024

High Temp: 71; Sunny

Notes: Sunny - A mother mallard has 10 ducklings with her on the Perch pond - one is white, like a Pekin duck!

Date: June 20, 2024

High Temp: 66; Rainy

Notes: Bright yellow Flowerpot Parasol mushrooms were spotted growing in the mulch across from the Garton Orchard Silo.



Date: July 2, 2024

High Temp: 60; Rainy/Sunny

Notes: Blazing star is blooming by the Train Depot; Astilbe is in full bloom throughout the gardens; Red lilies are beginning to bloom