

GROWERTALKS

Under an Acre

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An Homage to Holland

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Nearly five decades ago, the city of Holland, Michigan, decided to create a space that would honor its Dutch heritage. The journey began with importing a five-story Dutch windmill and strategically choosing a location for their Dutch heritage park.

“They selected the site of Windmill Island Gardens because it’s downwind from the lake, always has a good breeze and is close to downtown,” said Betsy Buurma Morton, who’s part of the horticulture staff at Windmill Island Gardens. The Dutch gardener created an elaborate plan for the 36-acre site, which never came to fruition due to a limited budget.

Pictured: Betsy Buurma Morton, head grower and garden designer at Windmill Island Gardens in Holland, Michigan.

Today, Windmill Island Gardens has expanded into a beautiful park and heritage site where visitors can experience a taste of Dutch architecture, floriculture and horticulture. The DeZwaan working windmill towers over the space, providing guests with an incredible view of the grounds. The site includes several replica Dutch

buildings, an antique Dutch carousel, costumed guides, an antique Dutch organ and a gift shop brimming with Dutch treats. However, it’s the gardens that transform this European theme park into a place of beauty.

A former art teacher, Betsy’s current role as Windmill Island Gardens’ head grower and garden designer allows her to infuse her passion for art with her love for gardening. Her enthusiasm is contagious as she describes how she creates unique designs for the 40 gardens. Springtime is an homage to the Dutch heritage, as the 150,000 tulip bulbs planted the previous fall in the fields and garden burst into bloom.

As soon as the tulips finish blooming, the team at Windmill Island Gardens jumps into action, removing each bulb to prepare the 40 beds for an infusion of annuals. It’s a fast transformation, as the gardens must be photo-ready for the events booked in late spring.

“We try to use larger plants, at least 4 to 6 inches, to get things looking as pretty as possible,” said Betsy.

Each garden is designed around a specific theme, allowing Betsy to tap into her creativity as she reveals the theme through uniquely designed gardens.

“The concept of having themed gardens was launched about seven years ago to help increase awareness that the garden beds are unique each year,” said Betsy. “It’s challenged me creatively, but it has also been a fun part of my job as I figure out ways to support the annual theme with the gardens.”

Previous themes include butterflies, birds and artists, where Betsy shared the story of famous artists, including Vincent van Gogh and Jackson Pollock, through flowers. This year’s focus was holidays, which included a Christmas bed, Fourth of July garden and a St. Patrick’s bed filled with bells of Ireland, lime orange zinnia and Wasabi Coleus.

“Our theme for next year is celestial summer. I’ve been having fun coming up with ideas for that one,” said Betsy.

Some of the other concepts that Betsy is creating for the gardens next year include full moon, northern lights, Michigan sunset, milky way and a Star Trek bed.

“Being in West Michigan, we are surrounded by growers and greenhouses who often provide ideas and donations. Walters Gardens is one grower who is always willing to help, including providing us with Captain Kirk Hostas and Starship Lobelia for the Star Trek bed next year,” said Betsy.

She reviews various sources, including local gardens, grower trials and the new varieties from seed companies to determine which plants to use for each bed, often selecting both new and unusual items to showcase. Depending on which option is available, Betsy orders plugs, seeds and liners in the summer to arrive and grow in the antique greenhouses on-site in March.

“We are often asked why we don’t get finished products from local growers, but our timing is an issue; we are not ready to plant things until the tulips are done, which is often weeks later than most people plant their annuals,” said Betsy.

Approximately 8,000 annuals are grown in the greenhouse while Windmill Island Gardens gets ready to transition their gardens into the second stage of the season. The site includes two antique greenhouses that are used to house the annuals.

"It's a very old, charming greenhouse," said Betsy. "The second greenhouse was from an estate in Grand Rapids. It is more functional and divided into two growing zones, a warmer and a cooler house."

Growing so many different plants can be a challenging balancing act since the grower needs to respond to all of the plants' unique needs, including temperature, water and fertilizer.

"I'm the one doing all of the watering and fertilizing," said Betsy. "By doing that, I get to know the plants, including being able to quickly identify if something looks different and respond to it."

Pictured: The working DeZwaan windmill is a focal point of the gardens, along with the 150,000 tulips that bloom in the spring.



This year, Windmill Island Gardens has joined their local Winterfest, marking the first time that the garden will be open in the winter season. Windmill Island Gardens is in the process of refining the design details for the winter celebration, but it will most likely include lighted buildings and a light show in the tulip fields.

The town of Holland, Michigan, remains committed to the garden, including investing \$1.5 million into restoration a few years back. Thankfully, it remains a favorite spot for both tourists and locals, for picnics, walking trails and a sample of Dutch heritage.

"Our visitors' numbers, both last year and this year, are breaking records," said Betsy. "I like to think that it's not just the windmill drawing guests to our space, but that they're also coming to tour and appreciate the gardens." **GT**

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