

A Garden Walk Back in Time

Passion and perseverance among the ruins



Nestled in the walls of the 19th century, the Bentonsport Garden of Historic Roses (top) offers visitors a glimpse of varieties propagated prior to 1867. The mountainous Rose of Sharon (above) is not so much a rose as a hibiscus, *Hibiscus syriacus*.

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You could say that the Bentonsport Garden of Historic Roses is a work of art. But a closer look at the time, dedication, volunteers, and vision behind the beauty reveals a real labor of love.

The exquisite 70-by-150-foot sunken oasis lives within the vestigial walls of a mill built in the 1850s. The garden's genesis was, in fact, the old mill's decay. A group of businesspeople and residents living in and near historic Bentonsport in the 1970s looked at the crumbling limestone and saw not ruin but possibility — a picturesque setting for a rose garden. Today, it's filled with a variety of plants, but its heart remains historic roses. 'Baroness Rothchild'. 'La Reine Victoria'. 'Quatre Saisons Blanche'. The garden is remarkable not only for its horticultural heritage but for its tenacity. Devastated by the floods more than a decade ago, it is just now hitting its prime.

The garden can be tricky to spot from the road, or even from the surrounding buildings, since it lies low behind the 3-foot to 4-foot stone walls that were once the mill's foundation. "Nobody sees the rose garden at first," says Betty Printy, a local potter, the owner of an historic home a block away from the garden, a member of the Bentonsport Improvement Association, and one of the



half dozen or so people who toil regularly in the garden. "You have to walk over to the stone wall and then, voila! There it is!"

The English have a long tradition of building beautiful gardens framed by history, incorporating the ruins of old stone buildings as the focal point. The group of Bentonsport volunteers that decided to create the garden in the old mill capitalized on this idea and created a garden filled with antique roses.

Then the rains of 1993 hit, and the Des Moines River — which you can view from the garden — flooded the area. "The garden was totally destroyed by the '93 flood," says Bill Printy, a local blacksmith and Betty's husband. "The garden was brim full of water and stayed full of water for three or four weeks."

Amazingly, 17 varieties of roses survived the long submersion and have served as a graphic illustration of the toughest genera *Rosa* around for Iowa planting. They include a few rugosa roses (an extremely hardy class that weathers well through Iowa's harsh winters), *Rosa mundi*, *Rosa eglanteria*, *Rosa gallica officinalis* (Apothecary's Rose), 'Jacque Cartier', 'Belinda', 'Reine des Violettes', 'Zéphirine Drouhin', 'Maiden's Blush', 'Dr. W. Van Fleet', and 'Autumn Damask'.

After the devastation of the flood, in stepped a number of volunteers. Instrumental among them were Clark and Alice Johnston, now deceased, of nearby Keosauqua. With the help of the Keosauqua Garden Club, of which Alice was a member, and local residents in the county, the garden was not only resurrected but enhanced. "I don't know that, if it hadn't been for Clark and Alice,



One of the newest additions, the water garden (top) sits where a millpond once fed the old mill. The nearby butterfly garden is a fine spot to watch the unfolding show (above).



the garden would have gotten done. They had ideas to make it even better than before," Bill Printy says.

Roses have always been a mainstay of the garden. Before the flood, the garden was planted completely in old roses, according to Bruce Whitaker, another Bentonsport resident and a steadfast garden volunteer. Afterwards, a number of modern roses were added because, unlike the antique varieties that peak in early summer, more recent varieties are longer-term repeat bloomers that provide color throughout the season. The garden's volunteer corps was especially diligent in planting Griffith Buck creations — roses bred by the renowned Iowa State University horticulturalist to survive Iowa's winters and sometimes-harsh conditions with minimal care and maximum flowering.

Today the garden includes not only roses in a rose garden all their own (with a striking new sundial crafted by Bill Printy) but also a butterfly garden and a new water garden, located where part of the original millpond once stood. The butterfly garden was started in 1996 in an area that had become overgrown with weeds and brush. There are now three flower beds bursting with butterfly bush, lilacs, bee balm, dame's rocket, gaillardia, phlox, verbena, butterfly milkweed, purple coneflower, asters, marigolds, zinnias, nasturtiums, and heliotrope that provide nectar for mature butterflies. The newly completed water garden boasts a small footbridge over a tiny waterfall and pond, and a collection of benches for resting and viewing.

Bentonsport Gardens, owned by Van Buren County and managed by the Conservation Board, receives some monetary support from foundations and garden clubs as well as donated plants and supplies from numerous individuals and area businesses. But the gardens' lifeblood is a resolute group of devotees. Some half dozen core volunteers perform vital maintenance functions, while additional volunteers assist on an occasional basis. From April through October, volunteers are out in force — weeding, planting, pruning, cleaning, laying landscape timbers, pulling invasive saplings, planning the future. The rewards come on a lovely early summer day, when all the roses are in bloom and the butterflies are flitting, and locals like Betty and Bill Printy can enjoy a remarkable garden born among the ruins, then reborn after a devastating flood. Bentonsport's own botanical phoenix.

"It's a unique thing," says yet another volunteer, Gary Dinsmore. "But then, the whole village is unique." 🌿

— Veronica Lorson Fowler writes and gardens in Ames.



The diverse flora and features that beckon visitors to pause and admire (left) require constant upkeep from a dedicated staff of volunteers, which includes Bill Printy (right).

HERITAGE PORT OF CALL

Bentonsport is an unincorporated town — really just a cluster of beautiful old brick buildings and homes and about 50 residents — located along the Des Moines River near Keosauqua in Van Buren County. Its most striking structure is the Mason House, an inn built in 1846 that once served steamboat passengers and now serves overnight guests as a bed-and-breakfast. The restored 1840s Greef General Store and other historic buildings that house small businesses selling art, antiques, and crafts await visitors just off of scenic County Road J-40. Up the hill from the quaint downtown is the old Presbyterian Church, another historic point of interest. Along with picturesque nature trails in the area, there are frequent festivals and other special events throughout the year.

To learn more, and plan your excursion, visit the Bentonsport National Historic District website at www.bentonsport.com or call 319-592-3222.