

Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens

Rhododendrons, azaleas, native plants, and tranquil woodlands

STORY BY *Stephanie Kuniholm*

SERIES COORDINATOR *Bobbi Angell*



Summer at the Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens.

THE GROUNDWORK FOR JENKINS ARBORETUM & GARDENS was laid in 1968 when H. Lawrence Jenkins preserved his property in the western Philadelphia suburbs as a living memorial to his wife Elisabeth, an avid gardener and wildlife enthusiast. In his will, he directed that the property become a "public park, arboretum, and wildlife sanctuary for the study of arboriculture, horticulture, and wildlife for educational and scientific purposes." Since officially opening to the public in 1976, the Arboretum has remained true to its founder's original vision.

Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens provides a restful escape from the bustling Philadelphia suburbs. Since its beginning, it has been home to an extraordinary collection of rhododendrons and azaleas grown alongside flora native to the eastern United States. More than a mile of trails wind gracefully throughout the woodland gardens to a pond lined with bald cypress trees and vibrant wildflower beds. The historic Jenkins House sits atop the hillside, with stunning views that overlook the gardens and surrounding landscape, including Valley Forge National Historic Park.

Botanical Collections

It could be said that the Arboretum did not choose the collection, nature did. Early soil surveys found the site to be perfectly suited for growing the acidic-soil-loving plants of the Ericaceae family (heath family) and *Rhododendrons*, *Kalmias*, and *Vacciniums* were among the plants found growing wild on the site. With this in mind, the garden was planned to showcase a diverse collection of ericaceous plants, focusing on rhododendron and azalea species and hybrids from around the world.

Since 1976, the rhododendron collection has expanded significantly, and now includes

nearly 5,000 individual plants representing 1,500 taxa. Among these is an expanding collection of native azaleas that includes all of the eastern native species and dozens of selections and hybrids of those species. Furthermore, Jenkins features complete, or nearly complete, collections from the lifework of several regional rhododendron hybridizers. This vast collection of diverse plants is a safeguard against extinction for species, a living library of hybrids, and an indescribably rich palette of genetic material for future hybrids and crosses.

Within the family Ericaceae, Jenkins' *Kalmia* (mountain laurel) and *Rhododendron* collections have garnered national accreditation by the American Public Gardens Association in partnership with the USDA in its Plant Collections Network. The accreditation of these two groups of plants is part of a continent-wide strategy to protect and preserve germplasm for taxonomic study, research, and breeding. Through this program, Jenkins collaborates with participating institutions to identify gaps and duplications in these collections with an aim of providing a robust bank of germplasm (genetic material). With this accreditation, Jenkins preserves one of the most extensive collections of *Rhododendron* and *Kalmia* in all of North America.

In addition to an extensive collection of ericaceous plants, Jenkins also boasts rich sweeps of spring ephemerals, lively wildflower beds buzzing with pollinators, a bog garden filled with native pitcher plants, and a high, cathedral-style canopy comprised of a mix of oak species.

Education and Outreach at Jenkins

Jenkins is truly a community-supported organization. Over 75,000 visitors pass through the garden gates annually, with free admission every day of the year. Garden enthusiasts near and far are invited to learn and engage with Jenkins through dozens of

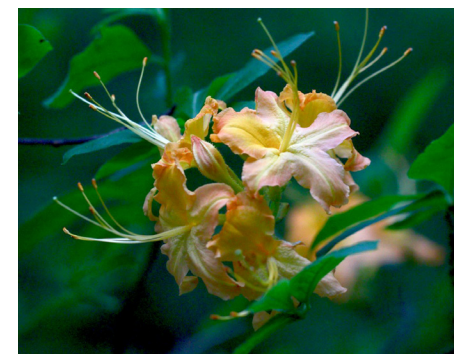
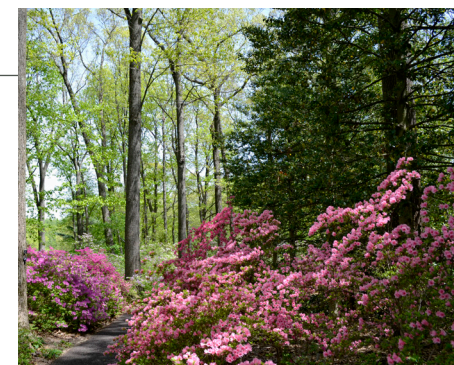
public programs each year on topics such as gardening in deer country, pollinator plantings, mindfulness in nature, and more. Pre-pandemic, educational programs were hosted in Jenkins' John J. Willaman Education Center, an 8,000-square-foot Gold LEED-certified building that opened to the public in 2009. This building houses staff offices, educational program space, and The Garden Shop at Jenkins featuring nature-inspired gifts and an extensive retail plant nursery. Since 2020, many programs have shifted format to be offered online with hundreds of participants logging on from across the country—and the globe!

Not only is Jenkins an educational resource for those wishing to increase their horticultural knowledge and skill, but the gardens also serve as the setting for community connection through several special events each year. In 2021, Jenkins will be hosting a Summer Picnic Series in the gardens as well as a Winter Luminary Weekend featuring 3,000-plus luminaria lighting up December nights.

Jenkins' Florilegium Project

In 2019, Jenkins partnered with three local botanical artists to undertake a florilegium project that will culminate in 36 artworks created over the course of five years. Artists and ASBA members Carol Ashton-Hergenhan, Deborah Dion, and Susan Mintun worked with the staff to select a list of plants that represents the essence of Jenkins throughout the seasons. These three artists have made Jenkins their second home as they visit often to study their plants and get to know the gardens on a deeper level throughout the seasons. The Jenkins Florilegium Project will conclude with a final exhibition and celebration in 2025. Be sure to follow along with work in progress updates through #FlorilegiumFriday posts on social media! Follow @JAGardens on Instagram and Facebook for updates.

From the vibrancy of spring azalea blooms to the contemplative architecture of winter, there is always something to enjoy, discover, and learn at Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens. If you live in the Philadelphia area or are visiting "America's Garden Capital," be sure to make a stop to explore the gardens and get to



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT The garden in its springtime splendor. Carol Ashton-Hergenhan painting practice of *Podophyllum* shoots. Deborah Dion, Jenkins Florilegium Project artist, working by the pond at Jenkins. *Rhododendron calendulaceum*.

know this special place. In the meantime, check out Jenkins' virtual Wednesday Walkabouts online at [JenkinsArboretum.org/Wednesday-Walkabouts](https://www.jenkinsarboretum.org/Wednesday-Walkabouts) for a glimpse of the gardens through the seasons. 🌿

Stephanie Kuniholm currently serves as the Director of External Relations at Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens. She holds a BA in Environmental Studies from Eastern University as well as an MS in Public Horticulture from the Longwood Graduate Program, a partnership between the University of Delaware and Longwood Gardens.

Jenkins Arboretum & Gardens

631 Berwyn Baptist Rd, Devon, PA 19333

The grounds are open to the public daily from 8 am to sunset with free admission.

www.jenkinsarboretum.org