

Designed to be Beautiful

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An agrarian metaphor provides a unique aesthetic for this new garden and its visitors.

The most beautiful parts of any garden are the living things. The mystery and the love of the garden and gardening are inextricably tied to the sheer wonder of the growth process—the interconnection of living beings, human and plant. But how do gardeners at major public gardens, or at home, weave together the plants and ornamentation of a garden so that visitors are not only impressed, but also inspired by its beauty?

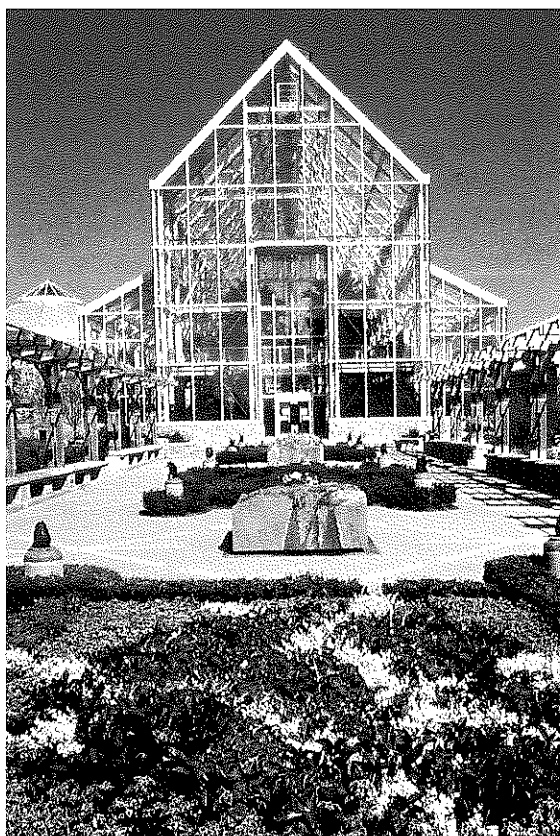
For the designers of White River Gardens, the answer was two-fold: Create a plan, then implement it well. But most important, says Vice President of Programs Paul Grayson, was the plan.

“It’s not necessarily just the plant material, the ornamentation, or the architecture. It really begins with the design and how those elements are incorporated into it,” says Grayson. “We find that most people, including the vast majority of people coming to White River Gardens, love to go down to the plant palette level and just shop around. And then they fall in love with the plants and go home and try to figure out how to use them. Really, the most aesthetically successful landscapes always

begin with an overall design premise.

“One of the features that works so well in the Gardens here is that the whole garden was designed around a common design technique called a metaphor,” continues Grayson. “That means you select a metaphor, then design around it. We elected to use a Midwestern agrarian metaphor, and that easily led to a series of design decisions.”

Chief landscape designer Eric Ernstberger of Rundell Ernstberger, along with the whole design team, began with the premise of an old ramshackle barn, battered by time but still standing tall on the country horizon. The image of that barn was the basis for the design of the 5,000-square-foot Hilbert Conservatory, the signature architectural feature of White River Gardens. From there, Grayson explains, “the whole metaphor evolved into the concept of this abandoned farm that was reclaimed and turned into a glorious garden.”



The barn-like form of the 5,000-square-foot Hilbert Conservatory reflects White River Gardens’ agrarian metaphor.

“Fortunately, several of the designers and I had grown up on farms, so we had some very strong imagery in our minds of what certain structures or settings felt like,” Grayson continues.

In addition, the designers decided to include art in a number of different forms, many of them based on the agrarian metaphor. This art addresses both the issues of providing a unique aesthetic for all visitors and supplying true gardeners with inspiration and ideas for their own garden projects.



Andrew Reid's "Midwestern Panorama" mural greets visitors in the main rotunda entrance.

First Impressions

The main rotunda entrance is the first place visitors encounter the agrarian metaphor. "We wanted a cylinder reminiscent of a round barn or a big silo," explains Grayson. "The glass cap to the rotunda is reminiscent of something both Eric and I felt was a strong image when you walk into an empty silo. That's usually the fill window—the door at the very top. It's just this very dark volume of space with this shaft of light coming down and the dust particles dancing in that light."

It is here, as well, that visitors are greeted by the largest scale piece of art in the Gardens and the one piece that is more akin to display than inspiration. The sheer dimensions of the piece are stunning—nearly 16 feet high and almost 160 feet long for the main part, and 10 feet by 100 feet on the second level of the mural.

The image "Midwestern Panorama" is 360 degrees around, surrounding the viewer with color and detail. In total, the work encompasses a sprawling 3,000 square feet of mounted painted canvas—the largest and most impressive work attempted by Miami-based muralist Andrew Reid.

The theme of "Midwestern Panorama" embodies the spirit and essence of Midwest gardens. Flowing seamlessly from winter to spring to summer to fall and back again, the main mural depicts flowers and plants from each season, along with vignettes of people involved in horticulture. The colors are vibrant and the images are immense, as the landscape teems with lush coneflowers,

roses, and daisies, to glowing pumpkins of fall and evergreen trees of winter. Among the foliage are gardeners readying for spring planting, children playing among the fruits of summer, planters readying the fall harvest, and snowy signs of winter.

Beauty in the Details

Throughout the Gardens, the designers found the metaphor helpful in decision making. In the exterior DeHaan Tiergarten, for example, designers needed to build a retaining wall. "It's a very simple wall with a very simple purpose—just to hold the soil back. But it was designed to look like a series of abandoned silo foundations. Constructed of craggy, yellowed Minnesota stone, the wall becomes both ornamental and a perfect staging spot for varied planting heights.

Everything, including the choice of flooring, was governed by the metaphor. Throughout the interior spaces of the Gardens, polished concrete floors look impres-

sive, but are not uninviting. The variegated shades of brown and black give it just the right touch of informality. Grayson explains that when faced with the decision about what flooring material to use, "I said, I want people to come right in with muddy shoes and never think twice about it. Come right in, and if you drag mud in with you, that's okay because it's a garden!"

Perhaps the most charming aspect of the Gardens' artwork is 49 bronze animal sculptures beautifully created by local Indianapolis artist Jan Martin. The sculptures enhance the landscape designs with a delightful element of wit and charm. Here, too, the overall metaphor drove the design decision, says Grayson. "All of the whimsical animal creatures were chosen because they had the correct context for an agrarian setting, as opposed to, say, exotic animal sculptures that could have gone in there."

Based on the drawings of Ernstberger, the sculptures depict a variety of "garden critters," including frogs, tortoises, hares, ducks, and squirrels. Placed throughout the outdoor spaces of the Gardens, the sculp-



Visitors of all ages enjoy the "spitting frogs" in the Clowes Water Garden.

tures' rich bronze surfaces reflect in the light and add yet another textural dimension to the play of natural and manmade materials. Replicas of some of these creatures are available in the Gardens' gift shop, but gardeners everywhere will understand the concept of adding their own touch of whimsical art to create truly enchanted ornamentation.

Martin was also the designer for several large metal artworks in the Gardens. For the transition space between the water garden area and the wedding lawn area, he designed and built four "vining" towers containing various bits of brushed steel and copper. These are reminiscent of windmills, but with an artist's touch. Martin canted the tops of the towers over as if they had been tipped in the wind. (Even serious pieces of ornamentation can have a touch of whimsy!) The copper slats that appear on all four sides of the towers will verdigris, making these elements attractive even when the vegetation on them is out of season.

Among the artworks that enrich the interior spaces of White River Gardens are artist Dave McLary's etched glass panels, which capture the beauty and harmony of early spring in Indiana. A celebration of new growth, the panels depict the moment in time when Indiana's winter residents enjoy their first taste of spring, including tiny birds, squirrels, chipmunks, and other denizens of nature. The panels form windows separating the Hilbert Conservatory from the public interior spaces, and the lush foliage of the Conservatory provides a fitting backdrop for the rich detail of McLary's designs. The panels honor donors of White River Gardens' capital campaign with a statement expressing the optimism of this new landmark botanical attraction. Although these panels are large, visitors could apply the concept of enhancing a gardenscape with etched glass to a home setting, using just a single pane of glass.

Natural Beauty

Beautifully positioned among the plants, trellises, and pools of White River Gardens, Indiana artist Dale Enochs' limestone sculptures blur the distinction between art and nature. Taking the form of natural rock formations, Enochs' works seem to spring from the earth itself, yet at the same time become canvases for intricately carved



Vining towers mark the transition from the water garden to the wedding lawn.

natural motives. Occasionally, the naturalistic form of a lizard or other garden creature set off in relief continues the illusion of nature. Enochs' dynamic vertical piece entitled "Earth Stone" features tumbling rivulets of water. Like a natural pillar formed in rock, the piece towers over and commands its surrounding space, while speaking the soothing language of nature in its surface design.

Dale's sculpted fountains fill the air of the Gardens with the soft sounds of falling water. Unlike traditional fountains that often harness water in artificial flowing patterns, the water of these fountains spills gently over craggy rock formations and trickles down through softly carved contoured lines that mimic the natural forms of rivers and streams. Enochs' works appear throughout the outdoor landscape, taking the form of everything from gateway stones in the sun garden to promenade cornerstones in the knot garden. One hundred sculpted limestone bricks, containing a wide variety of images in relief, ornament the wall surrounding the pergola of the wedding garden and other structures. This type of art is intended to be an idea generator for gar-

deners anywhere. The concept of blending art with naturally occurring forms can be utilized in any size garden and with a variety of materials other than limestone.

Interactive Art

In its constantly shifting forms, "The Four Seasons"—an innovative creation by Indiana sculptor Amy Brier—evokes the beauty and mutability of nature. The work features four hand-carved, 14-inch limestone spheres, each covered in a design that depicts one of the four seasons. Large, delicately rendered snowflakes represent winter. Leaves and ferns illustrate spring growth. Flowering plants and insects blossom in the summer carving, while oak and maple leaves adorn the autumn sphere. Through the changing seasons, each ball takes its turn as the focus of the complete work, which invites visitors to roll the featured sphere through a large container of sand, thus creating intricate and ephemeral impressions. The continual process of creation and erosion captures the growth and transience of natural cycles and provides a unique aesthetic experience. While it may not be possible for the average gardener to install a massive limestone sculpture in the backyard, the concept of changeable art within the garden can easily be translated into individual experiences of creativity and beauty.

"I think the physical artwork in the gardens is very memorable for most people," says Grayson. White River Gardens hopes to inspire novice and experienced gardeners alike to think creatively about combining nature and art in their own gardens. But perhaps the greatest gift the Gardens can give to visitors is the gift of planning.

"I think most people are artists inside—just looking for ways to express it," says Grayson. "Gardening is a way of expressing yourself—it's a way of taking an idea and giving life to it. If people will stop and take the same concepts we've used in the Gardens, and come up with their own plan, their spaces will be that much more successful."

