

'Harry Potter'-esque Wizard's Garden at Memphis Botanic Gardens demonstrates power of plants

By Christine Arpe Gang

Friday, June 10, 2011

Every garden is filled with magic.

It's in tiny seeds that turn into huge trees, in plants that survive in the most unlikely places and in flowers with fragrances powerful enough to attract butterflies, bees and hummingbirds.

But another kind of magic is happening this summer in My Big Backyard, the children's garden at the Memphis Botanic Garden.

In the new Wizard's Garden there, children are making potions, waving magic wands, hiding in a willow hut and having as much fun as Harry Potter and his team in a winning game of Quidditch.

"Since the last 'Harry Potter' movie comes out this summer, we decided to use wizards as the theme for our changing idea garden area," said Mary Helen Butler, director of education at

the botanic garden.

Before deciding on the theme and then the plans for the garden, Butler's staff sought input from members of the Memphis Horticultural Society and sponsorship from First Tennessee Bank, which also sponsored the two previous idea gardens.

Staff members designed and built a castle-like structure with three "rooms" for hands-on activities where children learn as they play.

Before they get to the castle, children ham it up as they stick their faces into holes in a photo-op panel, which, thanks to the artwork of Stephanie Miller, gives them the instant look of a wizard or witch.

Then they might don a Hogwarts-style choir robe to continue their fantasy.

Every Friday from 10 until 11 a.m., children are invited to a potions party, where they make frothy concoctions from all kinds of botanical ingredients.

But they can stir up magical mixtures using a giant mortar and pestle whenever they visit.

Wilson Mefford, 4, and Amelia Summy, 5, are a little too young for "Harry Potter" books or movies, but they know about wizardry from other books.

Wilson blended together some dry materials for a potion that he said "turns bad guys into wizards."

Amelia, who likes to cook, decided a pretend soup would be better than a potion. But she still got into the magic of the place when she refused her mother's request for a kiss.

"Witches are so mean; they don't kiss their moms," she told her mom, Annah Summy.

Lining the walls of the potion parlor are dozens of bottles and vials of ingredients collected and imagined by Lisa McGeorge, the caretaker of the children's garden, who was into fantasy, wizardry, fairies and magic long before Harry Potter appeared on the literary scene.

Using information in the "Harry Potter" books and other fantasy sources, she started amassing potion ingredients last winter.

Some are real items such as dried artemisia, wormwood, sweet gum balls, mugwort and chaste tree leaves.

But she had to use her own magic to bottle dragon's blood, lightning, unicorn berries, brimstone and baby bats.

The "Harry Potter" books enlightened her about the powers of magic wands. McGeorge stripped the bark from twigs of several tree species, embellished them with carvings and turned them into 60 wands with various powers.

A wave with a cypress wand is said to bring longevity; a wand made of cherry would elicit truth; an osage orange wand has the power to make you grow 10 times your size.

The interactivity continues in the first room of the castle with "build-a-plant," a spinning stack of four rotating wood cubes. Miller painted each side of the cubes with a part of a flower -- roots at the bottom followed by stems, leaves and flowers.

Children (and parents) are challenged to line up the cubes with the matching parts.

"Build-a-plant is one of our regular activities for children," said Gina Harris, who does special projects in the education department. Her father, Rick Bailey, built the cubes. "We'll keep this teaching tool permanently."

Then -- abracadabra! -- curtains on a nearby wall are opened to reveal the roots of a real peanut plant growing in a see-through container.

The weeping Atlas cedar that anchors a corner needs no embellishment to fit into the theme. Its pendulous arms covered in silver-blue needles can be as sinister and dark as they are compelling and beautiful, depending on the mindset of the viewer.

"It's almost like the Whomping Willows in the 'Harry Potter' books," McGeorge said. Those trees attack anything that comes near them. The Atlas cedar is stationary, but

occupies a lot of space.

Because of its prickly needles, it's off-limits as a hiding or playing place.

But children can crawl into the "Creature Keeper," an open space in a willowy hut equipped with pictures and descriptions of various animals.

Like Harry and his friends, visitors can choose an animal with the qualities they most desire to be with them at all times.

Chris Cosby, the curator of the children's garden, knows a lot about fantasy and wizardry. His family -- two daughters and his artist wife, Stephanie Miller -- are all into it.

He chose plants for the space with wizards, castles and magic in mind:

Broomcorn looks like corn in the field, but it never develops an ear. Instead it produces coarse straw that is dried and used to make brooms. It takes 200 plants growing for months and drying for weeks to make a single broom.

Witches and wizards use brooms for transportation and broomcorn for certain spells. The botanic garden plans to have a broom-making workshop in the fall.

The eyeball plant may be one of the most unusual in the garden.

Its blooms are golden ovals with burgundy "eyeballs" that seem to look right at you atop their long, slender stems.

If you put one in your mouth, the analgesic it contains will numb your gums enough to make you drool. Thus its other name, "toothache plant."

The flowers of Vampire, a calibrachoa or Million Bells, are blood red.

Sissinghurst verbena, which has pretty pink flowers, is named for the famous castle with wonderful gardens.

Cup and saucer vine, which reminds us of the magic in "Alice in Wonderland," has big cup-shaped blooms that arise from a cluster of petals, surrounding the base like a saucer.

Sometimes called cathedral bells, the plant is available with light blue, lavender or creamy green flowers.

Butterflies like White Queen and Violet Queen cleomes or spider flowers, and so do wizards and regular people.

Black Velvet petunia is solidly black with just a dot of yellow at the center.

Other black or almost-black flowers to consider in a wizard's garden are Nigra hollyhocks, which have maroon flowers so dark they appear black; Black Prince snapdragon, which has dark red flowers; black nasturtiums, black coneflower, which is a petal-less rudbeckia with long black cones, and Queen of the Night tulip, a deep, dark purple.

The black petals of Phantom petunia are almost obliterated by a distinctive yellow star pattern.

The pumpkins and gourds growing in the garden will be used for fall decorations and crafts.

If you go

The Wizard's Garden is located in My Big Backyard, the children's area at the Memphis Botanic Garden, 750 Cherry.

Potion Parties for children ages 4 to 10 are held from 10 to 11 a.m. Fridays during June. A \$3 fee, in addition to admission, covers supplies and snacks. No reservations required.

Wizard Games will be played from 10 a.m. to noon Saturday. The free activities include Magic Bubbles, Tumbling Tower, Dragon Egg relay, broom races and toy frog tosses.

My Big Backyard is open during the botanic garden's regular hours, which are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday and Monday.

Admission to The Wizard's Garden and My Big Backyard is free with regular admission to the botanic garden: \$5 for adults; \$4 for seniors 62 and up; \$3 for children 2 to 12; children under 2 admitted free.

For more information on events at the botanic garden, go to memphisbotanicgarden.com, or call 576-4100.



© 2011 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online