

Acton's Emerald *Necklace*

BY ROBERT BURGESS

Even if you're looking for it, it's not easy to find. A pathway entrance on Main Street in Acton is marked by a humble wooden sign with gold lettering. If you come by car, you're going to need to turn down Taylor Road — not exactly a bustling thoroughfare. Just down on the left is a modest parking lot that seems out of sync with the expanse of terrain waiting a few steps away.

Welcome to the Acton Arboretum, the jewel of the town's 2,700 acres of public open space. This is a place few know about, but those that do can't seem to stay away.

Where else can you find a hosta garden with 150 species, a butterfly garden, an ancient bog and glacier-carved esker

all at the same site? Whether you're a serious botanist or just looking for a place to have a picnic lunch, the Acton Arboretum is a satisfying experience.

Acton is a community that prides itself on its investment in open space. When some Bay State towns were building on land in the 1960s and 1970s, Acton voters were agreeing to gobble up parcels to remain undeveloped in perpetuity. And in 1986, when the opportunity arose to purchase an out-of-commission apple orchard on Main Street, residents once again agreed to preserve their wild reserves.

The move took a leap of faith. The 64-acre plot that would become the Acton Arboretum had vines of poison ivy



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enveloping the land and seemingly attempting to pull the trees to the ground.

"I think it's pretty unique," Cathy Fochtman, the town's recreation director, says of the now well-manicured arboretum. "It took vision to carry it out."

One of the purveyors of that visionary blueprint was Tom Tidman. Now the natural resources director for Acton, Tidman arrived on the scene in 1987 and has nurtured many ideas into reality. He does it with a small team of town employees, a dedicated lot known as the Friends of the Acton Arboretum and a large band of volunteers. All have a singular purpose: Make the arboretum shine.

"It's a hidden treasure," says Tidman. "But not so hidden."

Make no mistake about it: If the sun is shining, you'll find plenty of people taking advantage of the arboretum. On spring, summer and fall days, dog owners will be playing catch with their canines, families will be picnicking, hikers will be headed to the trails out back, and gardeners will be admiring the myriad offerings. And each year the arboretum hosts a handful of weddings.

Dick Tavernier, a longtime volunteer, says people who discover the arboretum fall in love with it and return with others. He remembers one couple who saw the sign for the Acton Arboretum while driving down Route 2. They decided to venture off the beaten path and Tavernier chatted with them a bit as they explored their new outdoor discovery. And he saw them there some weeks later with friends.

"They were saying it's a jewel," Tavernier recalls.

Not only is the arboretum a hidden treasure, but there are also treasures hidden within it. Even if you frequent the

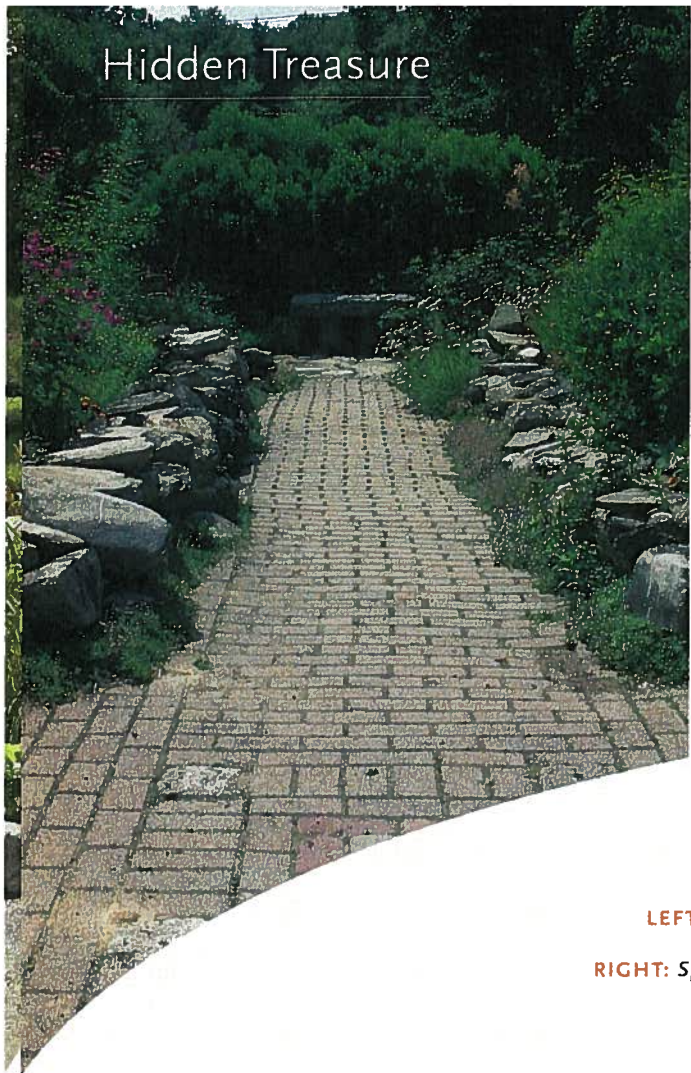
Photos courtesy Acton Arboretum & Friends

OPPOSITE PAGE: *The daylily garden is located on the Upper Grounds.*

ABOVE LEFT: *The butterfly garden is one of several gardens near the Acton Arboretum's Taylor Road entrance.*

ABOVE RIGHT: *The hosta garden is in the more developed landscape of the Upper Grounds.*

Hidden Treasure



Photos courtesy Acton Arboretum & Friends

LEFT: *The herb garden is planted with specimens commonly used in colonial times.*

RIGHT: *Specimen trees and shrubs are labeled with both common and botanical names.*

arboretum, there's always something new to find, either a spot you missed or a new garden creation or walkway. The Friends of the Acton Arboretum have put together self-guided tours that help visitors get a sense of all that's here.

A tour for the Upper Grounds begins at the swale garden with plants like summersweet, inkberry and hardy roses. A wooden footbridge leads walkers to the hosta garden. There's also a butterfly garden, herb garden, open meadow, red maple swamp, a wildflower garden and several ponds. If you look closely you'll see a lilac collection and an old farm quarry.

"You get a good cross section of New England," Tidman says.

The diversity of the terrain is another draw for the arboretum and nowhere is that clearer than on the "Back 40" self-guided tour. There you can see where a glacier was at work eons ago carving the land at its will. Remnants of that frozen time are also seen at the 2.5-acre bog and a long esker, a leftover raised gravel streambed created by the melting and receding glacier. Visitors can walk over the

bog using the boardwalk and along the esker's peak where a path winds.

And if you're looking, you'll see old apple trees remaining from the time when the land was cultivated for agriculture.

"It doesn't ask for much," Tidman says of the arboretum. "It just quietly exists."

A brisk walk through the arboretum will take about an hour, just to catch an overview. But to discover those hidden treasures within, you'll need to come back, either with friends or for some solitary daydreaming. Just make sure you don't miss the entrance. ■

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