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# SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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## Botanical Gardens to Love

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### **Biltmore Gardens, Asheville, NC**

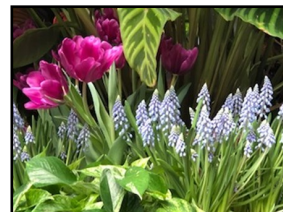
I volunteered to write about the gardens at the Biltmore Estate because I thought, “What a great opportunity to visit on my way back from Myrtle Beach.” I hadn’t been there since I was a teen. Even though it was March, there was still plenty to see, but if you are hoping to enjoy outdoor blooming flowers and shrubs, you might want to target late spring and summer.

Just driving through the estate was a treat—the influence of Frederick Law Olmsted, who also designed Louisville’s park system, is evident. The Biltmore Estate is indeed parklike, with the roads winding around creeks and lined with stone bridges. But during the cool months, the conservatory is the place to go (top right). My favorite was the orchid room, with the flower bed a close second.

So first, the flower bed. This is literally a bamboo bed-frame that has been planted with all kinds of tropical plants so that it gives the appearance of having a canopy, pillows, a quilted spread, and so on. The first photo is the view as you enter the “bedroom” and the next is a close-up of the headboard. Then the third shows a side view with the pillows and flowered spread. It’s far more elaborate than the one



I tried to make years ago with an old iron bed frame, but it’s inspired me to think about trying something similar again. One tip I picked up at Biltmore was to build up the center of the bed rather than trying to get plants that grow tall enough to form the bed-spread.



The greenhouses are connected so that you don’t have to walk outside as you move from one to the other.

I recognized a number of specimens that I’ve tried to raise as houseplants, but these decades-old varieties are enormous and breathtaking because of the exotic blooms that I’ve not always been successful in achieving. My one regret was that there were very few identification signs. What I did appreciate was the inspiration for how to group plants and how to carry a color theme across a garden. This shot (right) is one I hope to emulate - fuchsia tulips, philodendron as a ground cover and what reminds me of muscari but was much larger than the variety I have grown in the past. In the background, if we can trust online plant identification apps, is calathea zebrina.

When the Vanderbilts lived on the estate, fresh vegetables and fruits were raised in the conservatory. There are still mature banana trees, in fact, that were loaded when I visited. Now, however, ornamentals are the focus.

The Orchid Room is a special treat. As one who has struggled to make my purchased orchids bloom a second time, I was awestruck. Only an in-person visit can really do this collection justice.

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The conservatory is just one element for gardeners to enjoy. The estate also features an Italian Garden, Shrub Garden, Walled Garden, Rose Garden, Spring Garden, Azalea Garden, Bass Pond and Waterfall, and Lagoon. Tickets to explore the grounds are \$65 per person, so it's worth planning ahead to take full advantage of the various opportunities. Bikes are available for rental and there's a pavilion for picnicking, as well as restaurants, gift shops, Vanderbilt museum and informational movie, horseback riding, and a winery). There is also ample territory for hiking - 8,000 acres remain of the original 165,000 (much of that is now the Pisgah National Forest). For another \$29, you can also tour the home, billed as America's castle and opulent beyond belief.

If you prefer to take a virtual tour of the gardens, try the tourist website "meanstoexplore," <https://www.meanstoexplore.com/biltmore-gardens-when-to-go-what-to-see/>.

Speaking of the Pisgah National Forest, another attraction is located there, the North Carolina Arboretum, an arboretum and botanical garden located within the Bent Creek Experimental Forest at 100 Frederick Law Olmsted Way, southwest of Asheville near the Blue Ridge Parkway. It's open daily except for December 25. There is no admission charge, but there is a fee to park.

Now that I know what's in store, I'll be going back in other seasons. I'm only sorry that I waited more than 50 years to return.

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