

Secret GARDENS

*The grass can be greener on the other side,
especially when planners consider unique garden spaces as
a natural choice for meetings and events.* BY SELENA FRAGASSI

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT M. REYNOLDS.

Portland's Lewis & Clark College rents out its lavish estate gardens in the summer months with five levels of greenery, water features and incredible views.



The Copeland Sculpture Garden at the Delaware Art Museum is a scenic venue choice with 12 pieces of towering art (at left).

Hidden gems are literally everywhere when it comes to non-traditional venues—and sometimes the best-kept secrets can be wonders of the event world. Such is the case in the middle of the hot, dry Las Vegas desert where there grows a secret garden at a mystical place called the Springs Preserve. “It’s really the birthplace of Las Vegas. It’s where water was first found in the city, so it is a natural preserve,” says Jason Bailey, event specialist in group sales. On the 180-acre “campus,” which opened to the public in 2007 and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, are two museums, a café, indoor meeting spaces and a lavish botanical garden where many weddings and group meetings gather to take in the natural setting.

“We have a garden amphitheater that seats up to 250 people and also a brand-new solar house that was designed and built by students of the University of Nevada Las Vegas,” says Bailey of some of the most unique rentable spaces. There’s also an arboretum and a framehouse where groups can have sit-down meetings or schedule cooking demonstrations or a cocktail hour. The entire swath of the 8-acre gardens can also be rented in full for one flowing production. The flexibility of the space has attracted a number of clients in the medical, financial, design and nonprofit industries who have come to adore the atmosphere and ease of use. “The gardens are very peaceful and such a different place than you’d normally get to experience in a meeting or an event. There’s nothing like it in Las Vegas.”

EXPLORING THE GROUNDS

It’s a similar selling point at the Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon that touts incredible estate gardens rentable in the summer months. They are part of the Frank Manor House built in the 1920s by a prominent family of department store retailers and were designed by famous Estate architect Herman Brookman who put a lot of thought into the layout. There are five levels, all that run along the same axis as Mount Hood, “one of the most beautiful views you can see,” says Kerry Keenon, associate director of conferences and events.

The many features of the garden are also breathtaking, including wisteria and grape arbors, a reflection pool, cobblestone circle and the Great Plat Field, an open lawn surrounded by tall fir trees that can seat up to 900 people, “which is rare,” admits Keenon, also noting that groups as small as 100 guests are welcome for more intimate events. Water features run through each level of the gardens right down to the lower terrace. The reflection pool, just below the Wisteria Terrace, has become a popular spot for a number of social parties and galas. “Groups put bistros all along the sides or run café lights over the top of it . . . and sometimes they turn it into a jazz club with a local orchestra,” Keenon says.

One of the great benefits of booking at Lewis & Clark is that the rental includes the entire estate garden property, “a very extensive space,” with very few restrictions. One is that the team must hire security “because we block off



The outdoor courtyard at the Dallas Museum of Art can host up to 200 people.

the entire perimeter of the gardens for you,” says Keenon. Another is that all music must be concluded by 10 p.m. though after-hour parties can be moved indoors to the 200-person Stamm Dining Room or the charming Albany Smith Hall & Courtyard.

Beyond those rules, guests are able to use the property at whim. “We’ve had a lot of corporate picnics set up bowling and croquet on the side lawns, and we’ve hired lifeguards for folks who want to actively use the pool,” recalls Keenon. “There are lots of nooks and crannies that are fun to explore and use in unique ways.”

WORKS OF ART

Art museums are also taking it outside by promoting their garden spaces to clients. At the Delaware Art Museum, in a residential area of Wilmington, a 9-acre Copeland Sculpture Garden provides the benefit of built-in décor with 12 pieces of towering art dating back to the 1930s and the addition of the 200-foot Anthony N. Fusco Reservoir that was constructed in 2005 where small ceremonies-in-the-round take place.

At the Dallas Museum of Art in Texas there’s also a sculpture garden with space for 1,500 people. The area is flanked

by modern art and enhanced by a brick floor, reflection pool and three waterfalls. Elsewhere, a first floor sculpture terrace is ideal for receptions for up to 40 guests while courtyards can host nearly 200 people. The space is popular for weddings and fundraising events, including the museum’s annual Fair of the Arts donor night that sets up a variety of food stations and incorporates live mural artists. “It’s one of the best events we do in the garden,” admits Craig James, general manager and executive chef.

Like the other garden spaces at Springs Preserve, the art museums host events year-round, though the caveat is that they have to be scheduled around the museum’s hours. “We mostly do evening events,” says Liz Derosier, general manager of Sodexo Leisure Services at the Delaware Art Museum. “Otherwise, during the day you might see our neighbors walking through or school groups having a picnic since the gardens are open to the public.” Everyone has been pretty respectful of the private events, though, says Derosier. “No one has wandered through a wedding ceremony yet.”

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