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Shh....it's a Secret! EIU Greenhouse & Garden

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Showcase

Ohhh ... it's a 'Secret'

Garden is an ever-changing oasis on EIU campus

BY SARAH MILLER
JG-TC Staff Writer

ike most gardeners, Steven Malehorn is pas­sionate about the plot of land he tends. "I think this garden is prob­ably the best garden on cam­pus, if not in Charleston," said Malehorn, the greenhouse manager at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston. The garden he refers to is known as the Secret Garden, due partially to its hidden location between the Thut Greenhouse and Life Science building. The title also draws from the book and movie of the same name, Malehorn said.

"The garden is hidden by the building. You don't realize its here until you're in the garden and realize you're in the garden," Malehorn said.

With over 441 species, not counting weeds, the garden flows from Seventh Street east of the Thut Greenhouse, along the fence to the south and wraps around to the north side of the Life Science building. Depending on where one sits, stands or walks, each area of the garden is different due to the amount of sun it receives, the types of plants, the landscaping or other vari­ables Malehorn has added along the years, literally. I'm commit­ted to making it better," he said.

A portion of the garden is filled with native shade plants, and divided by a pathway into a "woodsy" garden and native specimen garden, Malehorn explained.

The woodsy part of the garden is made to look reminis­cent of what visitors would see in a wooded area in east cen­tral Illinois. Malehorn does selective weeding to keep the area from becoming overrun by invasive species and removes different species each year to make one more domi­nant.

The "civilized woodland gar­den" is filled with specimen plants, nestled in a dry, shaded area of the garden under two towering Dawn Redwood trees.

Directly below the red­woods, the ground is covered with hostas, the only plant Malehorn has been able to grow as the trees absorb a large amount of water, he said.

"I spent eight years trying to grow other plants," he said. The Dawn Redwood was thought to be extinct, but was found growing in China in the 1940s and can now be found throughout the world.

"It's a living fossil," he said. As it is Malehorn's intention for the garden to always be in a state of change, in 2010, he added raised beds made of native limestone, hand-picked from the Charleston Stone Quarry. A path, made of bricks that Malehorn recycled when the old brick wall was removed, winds through the native shade portion of the garden.

The constant changes and use and reuse of materials and plants within the garden allow Malehorn to incorporate his artistic skills into the landscape.

For the past few years, he has been working on a bache­lor's degree in art, and prior to working at EIU, was in engineering for 20 years.

"It takes an artistic skill to put a 1950s Buick Roadmaster in your garden," he said as he explained his take on a car's grill fashioned from pieces of concrete that surrounds a bed of native grasses.

South of the greenhouse and north of the fence along the main sidewalk, the garden transitions to full sun. In the herb garden, another new addition is one of Malehorn's favorite areas.

Thut Greenhouse manager Steven Malehorn waters a shaded section of the Secret Garden. He has spent three to four hours a day watering the garden this summer due to the drought.

Last year, Malehorn planted a chamomile pathway, an idea derived from the popularity on chamomile lawns in Europe and now the U.S. The path can handle moderate traffic and emits a soft scent of chamomile when walked on. The garden has not always been as lush, nor intricate. When Malehorn took over the responsibility of overseeing the garden in 2003, it was clear it needed to be updated, he said.

"It was just sitting here lan­guishing. I wanted to turn it into something interesting as a specimen garden. I look it as a "cultivated" garden," he said.

Today, the Secret Garden, greenhouse and greenhouse courtyard cover 4,000 square feet and are home to approxi­mately 2,000 species — a far cry from the small study gar­den that consisted of grass and a path of broken concrete near the greenhouse when it was built in 1962, Malehorn said.

In the 1970s, more plants were added and it became known as the Azalea Garden, as members of the campus community began donating azaleas for the garden, Male­horn said.

During the 1970s and the 1980s, additional landscaping was added including shrubs, hostas, daylilies, rhododen­drons and a few trees, he said.

The garden certainly takes more time and effort these days; Malehorn has watered for three to four hours every 365 days a year. "I've been here every single day for 14 years. I'm com­mitted," he said with grin.

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Soak up the wonders of the Secret Garden this weekend.
Above: View of the Secret Garden next to Thut Greenhouse at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston.

Above: Prickly pear cactus, an Illinois native, is one of the plants living in the Secret Garden.

At right: The curved edging of recycled bricks winds through the Secret Garden. The bricks were once part of a wall in the garden.