Now in its eighty-sixth year, Virginia’s Historic Garden Week is joined by an exhibition of French floral still-life painting at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

By Tom Christopher
Garden tours are common enough, but none on the scale of Virginia’s Historic Garden Week, when volunteerism rises to the level of activism. Thirty-four hundred volunteers from garden clubs across the state come together for eight days every spring to coordinate thirty-plus separate tours that open some 250 of the state’s most exceptional gardens and residences to the public. For the garden lover this event is an unparalleled feast. For the state’s heritage it is a lifeline, as the proceeds are devoted to the preservation and restoration of historic public landscapes.

The gardens available for viewing are a mixed bag, some large and grand, some intimate and personal, new and old. To begin at the beginning, however, to see the very oldest landscapes in the state (and even the nation) the garden tourist must take the James River Plantations Tour.

Facing page: Zephirine Drouhin climbing roses form an arch over the doorway of the kitchen, one of many outbuildings at Tuckahoe Plantation, c. 1733, the boyhood home of Thomas Jefferson. Photograph by Todd Wright. This page, clockwise from top left: Vase with Cornflowers and Poppies by Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), 1887. Oil on canvas, 31 ½ by 26 ¾ inches. Triton Collection Foundation, Netherlands. Flowers in a Crystal Vase by Edouard Manet (1832–1883), c. 1882. Oil on canvas, 12 ¾ by 9 ¾ inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection. Peonies line a fence at Eyre Hall, c. 1758, the only private residence in southeastern Virginia to gain National Historic Landmark status. Home to the Eyre family since it was built, the property also boasts one of the nation’s oldest gardens. Photograph courtesy of Diane Ginsberg and the Garden Club of the Eastern Shore.
A Queen Anne sideboard in pristine condition is a rarity; the Queen Anne forecourt at Shirley Plantation is unique, at least on this side of the Atlantic. The rectangular space in front of the James River plantation house dates to the early eighteenth century; flanked by symmetrical outbuildings arranged on a twelve-foot grid, it has a spare grandeur that makes a fine introduction to the surrounding plantings of ancient boxwoods and camellias. When visitors tire of this, they can tour the house, which is inhabited by direct descendants of Edward Hill I, who founded the plantation in 1638, or rest in the shade of a massive oak, estimated to be 360 years old, and admire the view of the river.

Established in 1929, Historic Garden Week originated as a means of raising money to restore the grounds of Kenmore, a 1770s home in Fredericksburg. The state’s garden clubs, which had agreed to take on this task, needed five thousand dollars; through a week of tours they netted more than three times that amount. It has been a story of success ever since. Aside from a hiatus during World War II, the tours have become an annual fixture. Karen Miller, director of Historic Garden Week, notes that last year (2014) Virginia’s forty-
seven garden clubs raised more than six hundred thousand dollars in this fashion. With visitors coming from all over the United States and even overseas, the impact on the state’s economy is substantial: an estimated $425 million over the last forty-five years. Factor in the costs of preparing houses and gardens for the tours (preparation often begins several years in advance) and the impact of 2014 alone totaled $11 million.

Travel just a few miles downstream from Shirley and you arrive at Berkeley Plantation, birthplace of President William Henry Harrison, whose current owner, Malcolm E. Jamieson, singlehandedly maintains the landscape of five terraced gardens, hand-dug before the Revolutionary War, that step down fourteen hundred feet from the house to the adjacent James. On the river bank is a memorial to the site of the first English-language Thanksgiving in North America, which was celebrated there on December 4, 1619 (almost two years before the Pilgrims’ celebration at Plymouth). Jamieson’s grandfather, John Jamieson, discovered Berkeley as a Union drummer boy during the Civil War, when he and the rest of the Army of the Potomac camped on the site; forty years later he returned to purchase the plantation. The Jamiesons have used the income from established in 1726, Berkeley Plantation is the birthplace of President William Henry Harrison. The Georgian style house, built using bricks fired on the plantation, stands among some of the 513 boxwoods on the property. Photograph courtesy of Berkeley Plantation.

Berkeley features five terraced gardens dug by hand before the Revolutionary War. Berkeley Plantation photograph.
farming the plantation’s 890 acres to gradually restore the house and gardens. Malcolm Jamieson still harvests Civil War bullets from the fields; his special enthusiasm is for the 513 boxwoods in the gardens. He knows this total precisely because he personally prunes each one of them every year.

Not all the gardens on show in Garden Week are historic, yet even the newest tend to pay tribute to tradition. Springfields in north-central Virginia (and a highlight of the 2015 Orange County tour) presented architects Gail Babnew and Joel Silverman with a challenge when they purchased the Greek revival farmhouse in 2001.

In addition to restoring the house, they wanted to create a landscaped setting that would be true to the period (the house was built in 1895) but not strictly authentic in that, as a farm, there had been little planted around the house aside from a terraced kitchen garden.

There were a few ancient trees, including a holly on which William Clark (of Lewis and Clark fame) allegedly carved his name, and a couple hundred overgrown and straggling boxwoods. The latter Babnew and Silverman cut back to three feet, restoring a sense of structure to the landscape while also reopening views from the windows. They created a complex

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The Greek revival farmhouse was built in 1895 at Springfields, a property first settled in 1791. Its current owners purchased Springfields in 2001, undertaking a challenging restoration effort. Photograph by Gail Babnew.

The landscape at Springfields was designed by the current owners to reflect the period in which the house was built and features seven hundred English and American boxwoods, five hundred David Austin shrub roses, and three hundred hydrangeas. Babnew photograph.
of four small parterres on the former kitchen garden terraces—while believing formality was stylistically compatible with the location and period, they didn't want to overwhelm the house, which although substantial is just a clapboard farmhouse. The ruins of a mysterious hexagonal stone tower that dates to the property's first settlement in 1791 has become a site for open-air dinner parties.

One of the most colorful, and competitive, customs of Historic Garden Week is the floral arrangements with which those hosting tours decorate their houses. Westover Plantation, a Georgian mansion built in the mid-eighteenth century by the Byrd family, was a feature of the first Historic Garden Week in 1929 and was again in 2015. It offers a wealth of views in its eight garden rooms with box hedges, lush shrubbery, and flowering trees. Andrea Erda decorates each room of the house opened to the public with at least one large arrangement, and she insists that all the materials must come from the grounds—store-bought flowers are frowned upon by the Garden Week volunteers. Azaleas, lilacs, spirea, dogwood, tulips, and tree peonies may all make their appearance—the ingredients of the arrangements depend on the weather of that particular spring, but always serve as microcosms of the gardens themselves.

This year, however, Historic Garden Week took floral arrangements to a new level with a coordinated exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. *Van Gogh, Manet and Matisse: The Art of the Flower* assembles sixty-five paintings that together...
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explore the development of floral still life painting in France from the eighteenth into the twentieth century. Through these canvases, “gardens in miniature really” as exhibition curator Mitchell Merling describes them, the garden tourist can learn to see in the manner of the great French masters—to understand a vase of flowers the way van Gogh did, to appreciate the lush bloom of a rose as did Manet, the bold colors of peonies as did Gauguin. “I think everyone has something of the artist in themselves,” Merling says; “at least that’s what I hope visitors to VMFA will discover when they admire those bouquets.” Certainly, no one can experience Historic Garden Week in Virginia without having their eyes opened wide.

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