

Open Gardens Day mixes business with pleasure

By [Kellie B. Gormly](#)

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Saturday, June 12, 2004

Friends of Jean and Ernie Nickel eagerly await gatherings at the couple's Murrysville home, particularly in their back yard.

In their half-acre, tree-filled shade garden, a 15-foot-wide gazebo with music speakers stands near a rushing pond filled with 17 jumbo goldfish and surrounded by lush plants. Gravel paths, lined with Belgian blocks, wind through an array of mostly perennial plants, including hostas and day lilies.

Birds sing from Japanese and oak maples, entertaining guests as they stroll through what the Nickels worked hard to complete over several years.

"It's called a shade garden, but our friends call it a park," says Jean Nickel, 65. Her husband, Ernie, 67, owns Nickel, Beisel & Co. accounting firm in Plum. "This is just a wonderful, peaceful place to spend an evening, have a glass of wine and entertain guests."

Next weekend, the Nickels will have plenty of guests to entertain -- an estimated 500 on June 20. Their garden is among 22 in the eastern suburbs and North Hills chosen for the annual Open Gardens Day Tour, sponsored by the Horticultural Society of Western Pennsylvania.

Gardens range from the giant, elaborate kind -- such as the Nickels' -- to the tiny city garden, and seeing them educates visitors about creative ways to grow plants in Pittsburgh's topography.

"We're trying to teach people the different ways of gardening," says Ellen Ahmad, program manager for the horticultural society. "People can learn a lot about good gardening and horticulture by coming on our tour. It's more than just seeing good gardens."

The event raises funds to build the Botanic Garden of Western Pennsylvania, which will stand on a 432-acre lot at Settler's Cabin Park in Oakdale. An estimated \$30 million is needed for the first phase of the garden, which would pay for building and installing infrastructure -- roads, sewage, electricity and water. The first phase also involves building half of the visitors center and some specialty gardens, such as the Children's Adventure Garden.

The society has raised \$15,000 to \$25,000 annually since the tour began in 1996.

The Botanic Garden of Western Pennsylvania will bring to the region new "green industry jobs," such as gardeners and florists, Ahmad says. It will be a peaceful, beautiful tourist attraction and local sanctuary where area residents can stroll and enjoy nature, hold business meetings, hear concerts and get married, she adds.

The yearly tour features an annual theme. This year's is "Hardscapes/Softscapes." Hardscapes include anything structural -- such as pathways, walls and gazebos -- while softscapes are plants surrounding the structures.

Each garden on the tour displays magnificent hardscapes and softscapes -- "really ... the cream of the crop," says Barbara Vilanova, publicity director for the event.

Lindsay Bond Totten, president of the horticultural society, selected the gardens from among homeowners she found by taking other tours and by networking in the gardening community. The gardens will give visitors ideas for their own yards, she says.

With gardens such as the Nickels' as inspiration, visitors also might gain the confidence to experiment. The couple built the garden for about five years after an intense storm on June 30, 1998, when 85-mph winds ripped many of their trees from the ground.

Elaine and Ernie Nickel, however, discovered an odd blessing. Suddenly, sunlight could beam to the ground, previously covered by a thicket of impenetrable green.

"It was a jungle of weeds and scrubs," says Elaine Nickel, who in the spring and summer spends a good portion of the day maintaining the garden, with a part-time helper.

"But you know what? I love it, so it's not work," she says, adding that the birds' singing makes the job entertaining. "It's our hobby."

Kellie B. Gormly can be reached at kgormly@tribweb.com or (412) 320-7824.