

Bloomin' Extravaganza

Where the 'hortheads' gather: along the shores of Lake Como at Coney Island

By Joyce Rosencrans - Post home editor

The army of Cincinnati Flower Show volunteers who showed up this week to help install the spectacular horticultural exhibits before the show opened today has been hassled, scolded and harangued.

No, the noisy abuse was not dished out by the staff of the show's guiding light, the Cincinnati Horticultural Society, headed by founder of the annual April bloomfest, Mary Margaret Rochford.

It was a mother goose flapping her wings and scolding the volunteers - a real egg-layer who put her nest too near the Lake Como shore by the Grand Marquee. Of course, this huge tent is where most workers, trucks and delivery people were going to and fro, their mayhem upsetting the expectant mother in every way.

Show publicist Marie Huenefeld said they were all praying the baby geese would hatch. No one wants to interfere with Mother Nature during the Cincinnati celebration of flowers, a springtime ritual ever since the show was launched from Ault Park 17 years ago, but volunteers shouldn't be hassled. Their enthusiasm is highly valued. "This show couldn't be done without all the volunteers," said Huenefeld.

Despite the delicate egg situation, everyone soldiered on to meet the 10 a.m. inaugural gate-opening this morning.

For the first time, the Flower Show will run continuously from this weekend through the next weekend, until 7 p.m. this evening and every day through Sunday, April 30, when the show closes at 6 p.m. to allow for an after-show, cash-and-carry plant sale.

Some floral displays will have to be refreshed as the days go by, and the container gardens have been relocated in a tent because the unfortunate snow and wind during last year's show beat them up so much.

By mid-week, show exhibits were taking shape. Former gold-medal winner and international exhibitor Medwyn Williams from Wales (winner of 10 gold medals at the Chelsea Flower Show) has returned with his giant vegetables, an artful, symmetrical display featuring 5-pound onions and 3-foot carrots.

His staff was busy in the Grand Marquee, making cherry-tomato topiary trees and setting out bundles of leeks, each green-and-white onion more than a yard long. His employees were still perplexed because they couldn't get their giant parsnips through U.S. Customs. "Are not parsnips classified as a vegetable here?" they asked.

The parsnip flap was probably not a terrorist issue because the globe artichokes they did manage to bring through airports are bigger than softballs and have a thorn on every leaf tip worthy of weaponry. View basketfuls of the 'chokes, along with dozens of other vegetable varieties that look like they're on steroids, and dream of your own vegetable garden to come.

Topiaries, the sculptural trick of clipping greenery into recognizable shapes, are a recurring device throughout this show, with some of the horticulture high art presented by Chris Kubicki, one of the owners of the Loveland Greenhouse. Some of these topiaries in the Grand Marquee also involve moss covering wire forms, such as the charming tea table and two chairs.

Show visitors will surely want to buy the set for their own gardens, but there's a topiary moose to covet, as well, an elephant, heron, giraffe and dolphins - all at the exhibit from Loveland.

Across the path, Munich Park Board master florist Karin Pressel, returning to the Cincinnati show for the fourth year, was arranging plants and props in a salute to Munich's Petuel Park. Dedicated in 2004, the 18.3 acres of landscaped greenspace and outdoor rooms atop a tunnel reconnect two districts of the German city divided by a highway for the past 40 years. Don't miss the eye-popping orange plants here, called Ornithogalum, according to Pressel.

From Petuel Park, go to a Petrol Park - an exhibit to educate show-goers about two biofuels from heartland corn and soy crops that might be cleaner and certainly renewable in this age of tighter petroleum supplies.

Gerald Checco, superintendent of Cincinnati Parks, has already gone "green" by transforming the fleet to biodiesel and introducing solar-powered, auto-compacting trash receptacles in four park locations - first in the Midwest. From these strategic moves came the idea for the Park Board's always educational Flower Show exhibit. Checco said the Park Board's centerpiece is an old Toyota that the police were about to have crushed.

The car is now quite the conversation piece at the Flower Show since it's been paved with corn kernels, corn cobs and planted with green and growing soybeans under the hood. License plates spell out "Soy Toy" and "A-Maiz-ing."

Checco said that Henry Ford believed that ethanol was superior to petroleum-based fuel for his early 20th-century Model Ts coming off assembly lines - which were his genius for gaining efficiency and holding down car prices for the common man. But then, Ford himself was a soy advocate for all things, from his vegetarian meals to fibers in his suits of clothes. He was only 100 years ahead of his time.

All around the corn-paved car, the park staff has placed green foliage and yellow-blooming plants, as a play on the GM ad line, "Live Green; Go Yellow."

Lesson and all - "An acre of soybeans can yield 50 gallons of biodiesel fuel" - the Park Board has also managed to present a very pretty garden with a pond.

Jean-Robert de Cavel and staff were also on hand in the Grand Marquee last Wednesday, working to set up a kitchen under the tent.

It's a shame his brick-floored French café - Jean-Robert Café des Fleurs - at the Flower Show will have to be temporary; the setting is that lovely. Mock windows with awnings and flower boxes line the café's perimeter, and giant southern magnolia trees shipped from Georgia stand sentinel.

Each of 26 dining tables will have a floral centerpiece, and a lengthy center service table for the wait staff will feature graphic blocks of color, a single floral variety for each, as Jean-Robert was inspired at Picasso in Las Vegas.

Reservations are recommended, taken from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. daily at a special cell-phone number: (513) 300-2215. Café hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Fare will include lobster salad, poached salmon and gallotiné of chicken paired with French wines.