

## Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

by Mackenzie Nichols

NEBRASKA IS known as the Cornhusker State, but for those who have never visited it, the nickname may reinforce a stereotypical view of its landscape as flat, predominantly agrarian, and largely treeless. The Nebraska Statewide Arboretum (NSA) works to dispel this image by showcasing and promoting the diversity of trees, shrubs, and other plants that can thrive in the state.

Though the word “arboretum” in its name is singular, the NSA is actually an umbrella organization comprising about 100 affiliated arboreta and public gardens located across the state. Having an arboretum in only one location wouldn’t be “representative enough of the state’s flora as a whole,” says NSA Executive Director Christina Hoyt. Encompassing

77,000 square miles, Nebraska stretches across the Great Plains and the “climate and landscape vary dramatically,” she explains. “On the eastern side, there are tallgrass prairies with more moisture, and on the western side it is very dry.”

The sites that are currently part of the NSA network range from the largest and most well known **Lauritzen Gardens** in Omaha, which includes a collection of tree peonies and a conservatory filled with tropicals, to the smallest, **Stella Arboretum**, situated on 14 acres featuring wetland and native plants.

### GROWING A GREENER STATE

Headquartered at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, the NSA has the broad mission to “plant Nebraska for

healthy people, vibrant communities, and a resilient environment.” In addition to promoting the state’s native flora, the NSA “evaluates plants that aren’t native but have the potential to grow successfully here,” explains Hoyt.

For example, one affiliate, **Gilman Park Arboretum** in Pierce, recently trialed various taxa of viburnums and hydrangeas to determine which could tolerate the area’s months of drought, instances of flooding, and long, cold winters. The trials revealed that certain viburnums could survive, but none of the hydrangeas proved hardy. Through these evaluations, which also take place within many other NSA-accredited sites, gardeners across the state can gain valuable insight into which plants will be most successful in their own gardens.



The Nebraska Statewide Arboretum network includes Gilman Park Arboretum in Pierce, above left, and Lauritzen Gardens in Omaha, above right.

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NSA-planted yellow-flowered bitterweed (*Helenium amarum*) thrives at Scotts Bluff National Monument in western Nebraska.

Another important component of the NSA's mission is to improve ecological sustainability. The organization works closely with local communities and affiliated institutions such as the University of Nebraska in Omaha on issues such as water conservation and creation of wildlife habitat. Hundreds of NSA volunteers collaborate on projects such as tree-planting and stormwater retention across the state.

The NSA also assists with securing funding for gardening projects throughout the

state. Hoyt points to one recent beneficiary, Beattie Elementary School in Lincoln, which used NSA grants to transform the area surrounding the school into a public park, complete with a native prairie garden, pollinator garden, and vegetable garden.

As projects like these blossom across Nebraska, they help broaden public awareness of sustainable gardening practices. "The biggest thing I've seen is more of an acceptance of the look of native plants," Hoyt says. "More people are coming to plant sales, and they are more informed than they were in the past. As people see more projects like Beattie Elementary, they learn how native plants are important for pollinators and sustainable landscapes, and as a result, more of these projects are taking place."

### CELEBRATING NEBRASKA'S LANDSCAPES

Another way that the NSA spotlights the beauty and importance of native plants is through its annual **Wildflower Week**, held this year from June 1 through 11. "Nebraska's wildflowers are part of its natural heritage," says Hoyt, something this event celebrates through statewide activities such as hikes and garden tours. Some of the most eye-catching species in bloom during this time include penstemons, milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp.),

### Additional Information

**Nebraska Statewide Arboretum Headquarters**, 102 Keim Hall, Lincoln, NE 68583. (402) 472-2971.  
[www.plantnebraska.org](http://www.plantnebraska.org).

- Hours: Vary throughout the state.
- Admission: All sites affiliated with the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum participate in the AHS's Reciprocal Admissions Program, which offers current AHS members free or discounted admission, **except** Lauritzen Gardens in Omaha, which charges \$10 admission for adults and \$5 for children ages 6 to 12.

baptisias, wallflowers (*Erysimum* spp.), and scarlet globemallows (*Sphaeralcea coccinea*).

These and other native plants transform Nebraska's landscape into a tapestry of color year-round with the varied hues of their leaves, stems, and blooms. Thanks to the work of the NSA and its affiliates, more residents and visitors alike are taking notice of the rich palette of resilient, beautiful plants that thrive across the Cornhusker State. ♪

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*Mackenzie Nichols is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.*



The Nebraska Statewide Arboretum's Wildflower Week features tours and hikes like this one at the Sandoz Garden in Chadron.