

Taltree Arboretum and Gardens

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Taltree Arboretum & Gardens is a remarkable asset to the South Lake Michigan region. Sitting on top of the Valparaiso moraine, Taltree boasts 300 acres of woody plant collections, gardens, wetlands, woodlands, and prairies.

The South Lake Michigan region population is growing rapidly in response to economic growth in the Chicago metropolitan area. This population growth increases vitality in our communities but places a strain on the infrastructure and environment. Traffic jams make for agitated drivers and frustration from increased travel times. Engine exhaust fumes add more pollution to currently threatened air quality. Loss of wetlands and other vegetation coupled with new roofs and pavement means additional rainfall runoff and potential flooding. Increased enrollment in school systems results in financial pressures to maintain quality education. Population growth does bring benefits but also brings tremendous challenges.

In 1997, Damien and Rita Gabis, Taltree Arboretum & Gardens Founders, recognized one of the problems of population growth, the loss of green space and the corresponding detrimental effect on people, and made plans to offer a solution. They envisioned a place where people would come to be refreshed and restored, enjoy the wonders and beauty of the natural world, experience art in nature, and learn about horticulture and ecology.

During the spring of 1998 Taltree staff and volunteers planted 35 acres of warm season prairie and more than 7000 oaks and hickories. Soon thereafter a large wetland that had been drained for agriculture was restored. Trails connecting each area were constructed enabling people to easily explore Taltree. Since that time numerous species of mammals, birds, insects, invertebrates, and amphibians have come to call Taltree home.

The Joseph E. Meyer Memorial Pavilion, a gift from the Florence Melton family, was constructed in 2002. As the first structure built at Taltree the pavilion is a showcase of natural materials artfully blended into the landscape. Families use the pavilion to enjoy the Music in Nature Concert Series and other events. Brides and grooms exchange wedding vows in an atmosphere of beauty and serenity. School children partake of picnic lunches in the pavilion after an energetic interpretive hike. The United Way and other not-for-profit service organizations hold seminars, retreats, and other events here. The Joseph E. Meyer Memorial Pavilion is fast becoming the preferred place for special events in a memorable and magical setting.

The Welcome Garden, Pavilion Garden, Native Plant Garden, and Audrey M. Hitz Rose Garden each have special features that delight the senses of sight, smell, touch, and sound.

The Welcome Garden exhibits a wide array of plants from around the world. Specimens include small Asian maples noted for fine leaf texture and outstanding fall color, *Stewartia* with their showy flowers and bark, and a *Katsura* grove.

The Pavilion Garden features plants native to North America that artfully blend with the wood and stone of the pavilion.

The Native Plant Garden exhibits primarily herbaceous perennials from North America in prairie, wetland, and woodland settings.

The Audrey M. Hitz Rose Garden is a special place with its massive granite blocks, bluestone patio, and pool surrounded by roses and rose family members.

Oak Islands is home to the largest oak collection in Indiana and features oaks from around the world. Oak species are grouped into planting “islands” based upon geography and soil types. Associated understory plants complete each island and provide visitors with a snapshot of the wealth and diversity of oaks.

Prairies, woodlands, and wetlands grace much of the land at Taltree. More than 80 bird species live at Taltree during various seasons along with many mammals and invertebrates. The diverse Taltree habitats make it ideal for visitors to see and experience natural areas once common on the Valparaiso Moraine. More than three miles of trails lead one on a journey to explore and delight in the wonders of nature.

Taltree is a contributor to improving quality of life throughout the region. Taltree, US Steel, Wildlife Habitat Council, The Nature Conservancy, and The Indiana Dunes Environmental Learning Center partnered in a project to help plant trees and other native plants at a US Steel site and in the city of Gary. Gary school children visited the sites to learn about conservation and restoration. The students, Americorp volunteers, and representatives of the partnering agencies planted trees in the Gary Ivanhoe area west of Ivanhoe Elementary School.

Five Taltree trees were donated to Ivanhoe Elementary School in Gary in 2006. Taltree staff delivered and helped students plant the trees on school grounds. A flowering cherry tree was donated to the city of Hammond as part of a 2006 bike path beautification project. Taltree staff delivered and planted the tree, then helped with other work along the path.

Clients (adults with physical and mental challenges) and staff from Opportunity Enterprises and Arc Bridges volunteer as Garden Guardians helping maintain the Taltree gardens. These very special people enjoy the opportunity to care for the gardens of Taltree and take pride in their accomplishments.

Taltree has been given special recognition by two prominent local organizations. Arc Bridges from Gary IN, gave Taltree the 2005 **Quality of Life** award. This award is given annually to those who, in partnership with Arc Bridges clients, contribute to improve quality of life for the people of Arc Bridges and the region. Arc Bridges also recognized Taltree for “**outstanding contributions and inclusion of people with disabilities**” during Disability Awareness Month in March 2006. Rotary of Valparaiso gave **The Phillip Antommaria Memorial Award for Environmental Excellence** for continued dedication to the protection and improvement of the quality of life in our communities.

Other awards Taltree has received include Porter County Convention & Visitor Commission **2003 Newcomer of the Year** for outstanding service to Porter County and the Indiana Urban Forest Council **2002 Civic Organization in Promoting the Principles of Urban Forestry in Indiana**.

As an educational foundation, Taltree is active in the education of youth and adults. Local public and private schools, home school groups, Boy and Girl Scouts Troops, and community summer youth organizations have come to rely on Taltree for educational field trips. Children of all ages come to Taltree to learn about ecology, horticulture, conservation, and their responsibility to become stewards of our natural environment. Interpretive hikes and activities are offered to students and adults participate in the classroom and field through various offerings including the Indiana Master Naturalist program.

The vision of Taltree's founders is alive and well through the efforts of a dedicated corps of professional staff and volunteers working together. Taltree is in a unique position to be a part of the solution to enhancing quality of life for all people in the midst of increasing population growth.