

Hershey's Nut Grove

The Garden's ABoreal Vision

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An efficient way to make quick, accurate grafting cuts, with the New Zealand made Scionion grafting shears.



Tucker Hill showing the cut surfaces of a splice graft.



Splice graft of the scion being slid into contact with the root stock.

“There is not a person alive who should not plant a tree, not for the shade you’ll enjoy, but for those who are coming after.”

~ Milton S. Hershey

Pawpaws, persimmons, pecans and Persian walnuts. What do they have to do with Hershey Gardens?

While the 75th anniversary of Hershey Gardens is being celebrated, and the M.S. Hershey Tribute Garden is being opened to the public, an unannounced, unusual and innovative project is taking shape behind the scenes that will change the garden’s profile forever.

Located in the gardens’ eastern end, beyond the children’s garden and perennial garden, planting, potting, growing and grafting are currently in progress on close to a third of Hershey Gardens’ 23 acres, adding a new concept to enhance and expand Milton Hershey’s initial idea “to create something beautiful.”

The original “Hershey Rose Garden,” which opened with 12,500 rose bushes on a 3.5-acre plot, now boasts more than 5,000 in season, plus theme gardens, a butterfly house, a children’s garden, and educational and cultural programs.

Alternately called a nut-tree “grove” or “forest,” the nearly eight-acre work-in-progress will be home to over 100 nut-bearing trees of various species including black and Persian walnut, butternut, heartnut, shagbark and shellbark hickory, pecan, hican (a hybrid of hickory and pecan), hazelnut, chinquapin, American chestnut, pawpaw, persimmon, white oak and pinenut.

A new approach to the garden’s arboreal vision, it will provide a place for children and adults alike to discover and observe the mystery and history, the beauty and bounty of deciduous trees that bring a living tapestry of brilliant autumn colors and foliage that falls and nourishes the earth.

When leaves and small branches drop to the ground in the fall, they’re not removed, but remain to become mulch for the trees, slowing down storm water and filtering rainwater into the soil.

The new addition will increase the plethora of trees already in place, including 100-year-old sentinels guarding the entrance and greeting visitors.

Since the gardens’ birth in 1937, more than 400 more trees and shrubs have been added to adorn the grounds including dwarf conifers, boxwoods, hollies, Japanese maples and weeping trees that add color and diversity to the landscape.

Huge lindens, Kentucky coffees, red maples, cornelian cherry dogwoods and

redbuds will remain in the area, welcoming guests as they follow the winding path to the cool canopy of leaves.

The idea has been envisioned by a network of creative minds for the past 20 years, waiting for a magic wand to bring it to life. Initiated by Bill Kieffer, Hershey Gardens' grounds and facilities manager since 1998, and Jamie Shiffer, Hershey Gardens' grounds and horticulture operations manager since 1989, the magic wand has waved to make their long-awaited vision become reality.

"Jamie and I have been thinking about a way to "forest" the large, open expanses in the back of the gardens for many years," Kieffer says. "This opportunity seems the perfect answer."

Kieffer and Shiffer shared the idea with fellow arborist Bob Good owner of Good's Tree Care Company, which has been caring for Hershey Gardens' trees since the early '90s. The excitement was catching, and Good's enthusiasm took it to the next level.

"I know the perfect person to work with us – a nut man," he says with a chuckle. He was referring to Tucker Hill, secretary emeritus and former newsletter editor for the Northern Nut Growers Association, a national nonprofit organization focusing on nut-tree cultivation.

Hill, with his knowledge of grafting and tree-growing, was thrilled to join the team. "I offered to contact the NNGA on behalf of the Gardens, and it was agreed that trees solicited from members would be donated for the project," he recalls.

The NNGA, founded in 1911 with members throughout the U.S. and in 15 foreign countries, brings together people interested in growing nut trees, including experts in nut-tree cultivation, nut growers, foresters, horticultural teachers, scientists and more.

The team was complete, comprising a "perfect storm"—a group dedicated to increasing public knowledge about the value of trees, vital to the healthful functioning of the global ecosystem and unparalleled in the range of materials they produce for the human race, including the oxygen we breathe.

Trees first appeared over a billion years ago, long before humans arrived, older than the most ancient pyramids of Egypt, living when civilization began in the Indus Valley and the earliest dynasties of China were founded, when ancient Troy fell to Greek invaders by way of a Trojan horse.

They were a signpost of evolution, a time that changed an arid, uninhabited world into a fertile, growing field.

The Hershey Gardens team was tight-knit, dedicated to their common goal. "All together, we discussed ideas about how to proceed, with emails flying back and forth every day," says Good.

Kieffer drew up the landscape, designed the area and made a list of trees; Hill decided where the trees should be located; and the NNGA continued its participation.

Hill, with his knowledge of grafting and tree cultivation, will be available to give tours and grafting demonstrations, which he does daily at the annual Pennsylvania Farm Show.

"Although the grove is a promise for future generations, the current generation will actually see nuts on the trees, as Hazels will mature within three years," says Hill.

"Currently, more than 76 of the donated, grafted trees are in the ground, protected from deer by mesh cages," said Kieffer. "When the trees are large enough, the cages will be removed."

In their infancy, 30 pawpaws that Hill grafted this spring with dormant scions (detached shoots or stems containing buds) are in pots at the garden, waiting to be planted in the spring.

"Bare-root seedling trees come from Canada and parts of the U.S.," explains Hill. "Then the one- to three-year-old trees are potted by Kieffer to be grafted."

Grafting, the art of joining tissues of one plant to another of the same, or closely related species, has been practiced for thousands of years, used by the Chinese before 2000 B.C.E. Spreading to Europe, it became commonplace in Ancient Greece.

Hill uses a "splice" graft to join superior scions to superior root stock. "We grow grafted trees rather than seedlings because we want trees that are disease-resistant, a good-quality nut that is easy to crack, high production and strong limb structure. Commercially, grafting is the most cost-effective way of propagating trees," he explains.

More details on the future of the nut-grove "forest," will be forth-coming as the project proceeds. Visitors can still appreciate the progress of the trees as they grow by visiting Hershey Gardens. For further information about hours and admission, check hersheygardens.org or call (717) 534-3492. **HBG**