

**The Life Aquatic; At the Oft-Overlooked Kenilworth Gardens, Waterlilies  
Hit Their Prime in Midsummer**

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Summer. Such an uncomplicated season. Winter's menace and spring's frenzy are over.

With calmer spirits, we emerge into the sunlight, relaxed enough to ponder mysteries

of the universe. This year's Metro summer series continues.

Summer has slowed to slog and drag. The heat churns high -- scorching, stifling -- and green grass covers. Midsummer is a vampire.

But not here.

Here, just beyond Northeast Washington public housing, beyond broken bottle glass scattered like mosaics of alienation and anger -- here lies Eden.

The lotus are blooming. In the worst months of Washington's summer, as other flowers wither in the exhausting sun, the lotus stretch five feet and higher, reaching for the sky.

Thousands of waterlilies are unfolding in Kenilworth Park and Aquatic Gardens. Nearly 45 ponds fill with Red Flare and Afterglow, Josephine and Madame

Walska, all soft pinks and pure whites, each keeping a promise made by Claude Monet. Here, amid urban struggle and neglect, lies an unexpected oasis of rarely seen blossoms, an almost secret sanctuary.

Arriving brings such a vivid surprise that there seems only one reaction:

"It's amazing!" exclaims Kathy Calhoun, visiting from Detroit.

"It's amazing!" echoes her husband, Dennis Calhoun.

"It's amazing!" exults their host, Helen Penberthy of McLean, when she walks up moments later.

"This is an incredible place. I tell everyone," gushes Sue Callahan of Boston as she paces a grassy dike. "It's a miraculous place."

The gardens are nestled between the Anacostia River and the Anacostia Freeway, just south of New York Avenue traffic that drones like a guilty conscience. They're the creation of a one-armed Civil War veteran. Walter B. Shaw, who in the 1880s worked as a clerk at the U.S. Treasury Department, bought 30 acres along the Anacostia and planted a few wild waterlilies in an unused ice pond. Soon, he and his daughter were importing lilies from the Orient, Nile and South America and developing varieties. After the ugliness of war, he created a life of beauty.

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By the 1920s, thousands of visitors were regularly stopping by to see the waxy blossoms and wide saucerlike lily pads. In 1938, the federal government bought the land and turned it into a park, preserved to this day pretty much as it was. It's a refuge for birders and weekend photographers, wetlands aficionados and college students who periodically come to study.

But today, driving to it means passing mounds of discarded tires and worn-out buildings. One can boat to it, but even this route requires a triumph of travail: The Web site warns: "Visitors coming by canoe should be aware that the marsh loses 90% of its water at low tide."

The ponds may be circumscribed by signs of poverty and neglect -- some visitors call the surroundings "a tough neighborhood" -- but the gardens are valentines of hope. Lotus blossoms inspired stories of Buddha, the architecture of Egypt, Chinese culture. They may start from mud and grow up through the murk, but they unfurl into the air brilliant and spotless.

By August -- the month that seems to swamp even the most stalwart of Washington ambitions -- the Victoria waterlilies will look like they're vying for a Guinness World Record. Their colossal lily pads will stretch five to six feet across, like they're plates on a table set for Jack and the Beanstalk's giant.

The gardens, really, are like fairy tales come to life.

Two men from New York, Michael Mai and Philip Wu, have driven down overnight with large-format cameras, eager to catch the lotus at first light. Word of the gardens has spread north: Other photographers tell them there's nothing else like it, anywhere, on the East Coast. Behind them, Callahan is wandering the dikes, taking close-ups with her pocket camera.

Last summer was her first trip, after a friend suggested they go "look at the waterlilies." Callahan, who teaches elementary art, silently rolled her eyes. "I was like, 'Okay. I'll go take some pictures of waterlilies.'"

Then she saw them. "I was floored. It was like looking at the sunflower fields in Europe."

Callahan is already planning for next summer, asking gardener supervisor Doug Rowley when in July she should return.

Most years, mid-July is prime blooming season, Rowley answers, but the chill in May slowed things by two weeks. On Saturday, when the gardens hold the annual Waterlily Cultural Festival -- which 1,500 to 2,000 people are expected to attend -- the flowers will have unfurled and the lotus will tower, but neither will happen as luxuriously as in years past, nor as lushly as they'll perform in another week.

Rowley leans closer. He is dressed in National Park Service khaki and green, a uniform that telegraphs serious and

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official, and he's confessing that his favorite moments in the gardens are when it rains. Wherever else in the park he may be, he comes down to the ponds and listens.

"It's very --" he begins, standing here, in the middle of the city, with the trees muffling New York Avenue's traffic and the freight trains rumbling the ground. "To hear the rain hit the big leaves: It sounds tropical, like listening to rain on the banana leaves. Or like rain on a tin roof."

Life and beauty teem here. Frequent summertime bird sightings include great blue herons and chimney swifts, Eastern phoebes and indigo buntings, song sparrows and gnatcatchers. Enter the gardens by foot, and the air both stills and turns loud: City sounds dim. Insects chirr and fiddle. Songbirds are a symphony. The resident beaver has dug a channel across the river to his dam.

Surely, paradise is like this, visitors must think.

Rowley, checking on the beaver's raceway, hears a splash behind him. His face goes grim.

"We have snakeheads," he says.

Maybe every Eden has a serpent.

The snakeheads came in with Anacostia River water during a flood, and in spring 2006, when one of the bigger ponds was drained, officials found eight adults and 500 babies.

Geese have also invaded the park, Rowley says. Several hundred are born each spring, and they're hungry: "If it's something they like to eat, it doesn't exist anymore." Their excrement creates algae and spongy-green duckweed blooms in the pond water -- "fertilizer for bad stuff."

Seems like the geese enjoy the gardens more than the neighbors.

"I don't go down there," says Tiara Green, shaking her head, like the gardens are something distasteful. She lives in Kenilworth Court just up the block. "We walk past it, but only children will go down there. Not adults."

In front of the New Smyrna Missionary Baptist Church, Bishop Earl A. Ross says he visited once, as a kid, "years ago," but he's never been back. "Just like the Washington Monument and all the other grand sites of D.C.," he says, "we live right here, but we never look at them."

The kids, though -- they know the gardens well.

"We see turtles." "And frogs. And snakes." "And tadpole fish." "And every kind of bird -- I saw an eagle." "And a blue hawk, and a blue jay." "And every kind of crane." "And a red robin" . . . goes the happy patter of three neighborhood boys, ages 9 through 12, as they leave the gardens one summer morning.

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Carlos Thomas, who is 9, lives nearby. Last year, he introduced the ponds to his uncle, Emanuel Speaks, born 50 years ago in Washington.

On a front porch near the gardens, Speaks is repairing the broken chain on a little girl's bike. He looks up and cracks his face into a wide, nearly toothless smile. He definitely remembers his first trip to see the lily ponds.

"It was," he says, "amazing."