



A Tying-the-Knot Garden

If any gardener who saw Panola Valley Gardens was asked if he or she loved it, the answer would be “I do.”

For 33 years, Mary Ann Norton and her husband, Gary, have called their 8 acres of outdoor paradise near Lindstrom, Minn., home. For the last 12 years, they have opened their garden gates to the public as a venue for outdoor weddings, receptions, concerts, and other outings where Mother Nature is a featured guest. The gardens that carpet the property are perfect and pristine, but this wasn't always the case.

The Early Years

Mary Ann and Gary raised their four boys where brides now walk the aisle, and for many of the years, the land was, as Mary Ann puts it, backyard baseball diamonds and football fields. “I was doing the mom thing and I gardened on the side,” she reports. Mary Ann is a farmer's daughter, who was born with “dirt under her nails” and an outdoorsy spirit. The property had



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY ANN NORTON

Mary Ann favors flowers in pastel shades, whites, and plants with a pop of yellow for Panola Gardens.

been in the family for a long time, and as the Nelson sons began to empty the nest, Mary Ann got an idea at one of their weddings.

“My second son, Tim, was the first to get married and the wedding was held outdoors at his bride's home,” Mary Ann recalls. “The outdoor setting was just lovely. I love the feel of an outdoor wedding, and I thought—I could help make this happen for people!”

When the Nortons' third son, Jeffery, was married two months later, the wedding was held at Panola Valley Gardens. When son Jon was married a year later, the wedding was held there as well, in a gazebo that Gary built for the occasion. Years later, their final son, Tom, was married in the garden.

Mary Ann decided to take the plunge and offer their acreage for couples to rent to tie the knot. “People probably thought I was a crazy lady with a crazy idea for her backyard, but our first summer we had six weddings,” she says. Over the years, the numbers have grown, and the garden is now host to concerts, teas, and parties, as well.

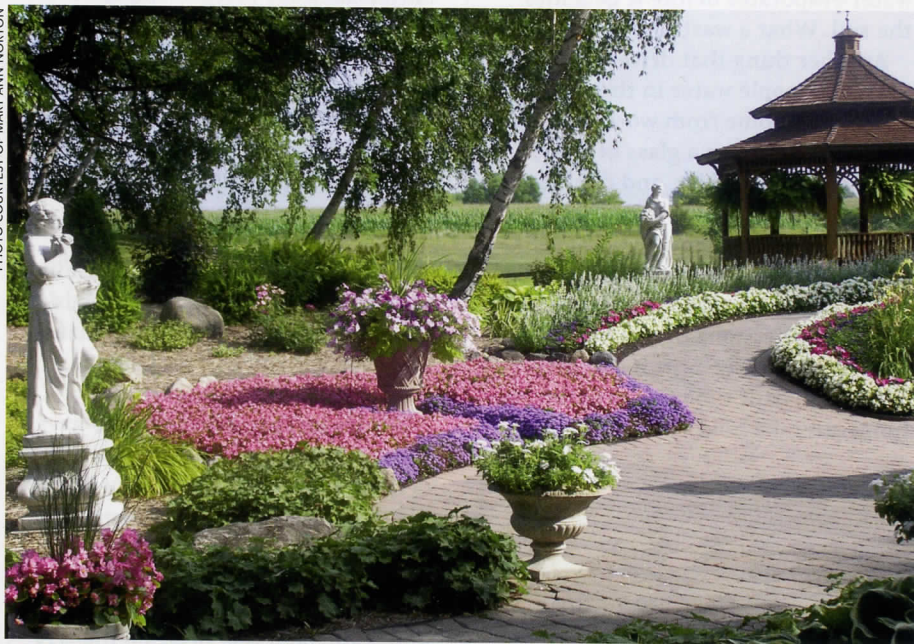



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY ANN NORTON

A flower-lined path leads to the gazebo where some ceremonies are held.

Gardens Galore

Thousands of annuals and hundreds of perennials fill the gardens. Mature oak trees canopy over waves of hostas, and Mary Ann's favorite roses and lilies (asiatic and oriental) are featured in the sun-loving beds. Mary Ann's color palette features pinks, blues, purples, plenty of white, and a "splash of yellow," as Mary puts it. Water features and various structures pepper the grounds.

When hosting outdoor weddings, the question of rain often comes up. "We've never been rained out, never for the whole day," she says. "We like happy brides." 

Minneapolis-based garden and graphic designer Eric Johnson blogs at www.gardendrama.com.

Five Rules for Wedding-Worthy Gardens

- 1. Water**—first and foremost. Flowers in containers need to be watered daily and flowerbeds need to be monitored daily for moisture.
- 2. Fertilize.** Mary Ann gives container plants a liquid fertilizer at half strength or slightly less every 10 days without exception. She adds compost to the annual beds at the beginning of the season. When planting perennials, Mary Ann incorporates a mixture of dry sheep manure and compost to get them off to a good start.
- 3. Deadhead.** To keep the beds and containers neat and tidy, regular deadheading is a must.
- 4. Mulch.** Mary Ann likes to use cocoa bean mulch around annual and perennial plants. (Be sure to avoid this mulch if you have dogs because it is toxic to them.) She uses it in her containers as well.
- 5. Replace.** If plants start to fade or look shabby, replace them.

—E.J.

Resources

Check out the gardens online at www.panolaValleygardens.com. For more information, call 651-257-6072.

—E.J.



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