

The Chesapeake Arboretum: Nature's Refuge in the Heart of the City

By BELINDA ELLIOTT

Now that spring has officially arrived many of us will be looking to spend more time outdoors. Chesapeake residents need not look very far. Nestled in a quiet neighborhood off Oak Grove Road is one of the city's hidden gems - the Chesapeake Arboretum. This peaceful wooded sanctuary offers a respite from the busyness of the city around it.

The idea for an arboretum began with a group of 14 nature enthusiasts who met weekly, says Phil Johnson, one of the arboretum's founders. Plans for the arboretum were first proposed by retired shipyard worker Wade Long. He had developed a drawing for an arboretum as part of a class he was taking at Tidewater Community College. When a guest speaker failed to show up at one of the group's weekly meetings, Long presented his drawing. Once the presentation was over everyone agreed, "We ought to build it," Johnson recalls.

Originally, the plan was to develop the arboretum in the Bells Mill Park area, and the group began working there in 1987. However, they soon learned from the Environmental Protection Agency they would need a costly cleanup of a nearby landfill to use the land. In the early 90s, three families living on farmland in the Oak Grove section

of Chesapeake decided to donate a portion of their land. The Williamsons, Whitehursts and Halls donated nearly 50 acres to the city, and it became the permanent home of the Chesapeake Arboretum.

Today, it is a thriving woodland, known as "Nature's Classroom," that attracts thousands of visitors each year. Visitors will find 45 acres of mature hardwood forest that includes 3.5 miles of walking trails, themed gardens, and bridges that cross a perennial stream. The arboretum's headquarters are also located on the property in a farmhouse built in the 1700s.

Jeff Cavanaugh, owner of Ever-Green Landscaping & Lawncare in Chesapeake, has served as president of the arboretum's board of directors for the last two years. The arboretum is a unique asset for the city, he says, because it is located in the midst of a residential neighborhood. "It's a great place to visit and view wildlife and see nature at its best," he says. Visitors come from surrounding areas to walk or jog on the trails, walk their dogs, eat lunch under the trees, or enjoy the solitude.

"We have lots of spots to sit on a bench and relax and listen to the birds and the owls," Cavanaugh explains. Some residents have even chosen the beautiful spot as a venue for their



wedding, he says. They have two weddings booked for May.

The arboretum is open daily from sunrise to sunset, and admission is free. Funded through grants and donations, the arboretum relies heavily on volunteers to maintain the property. Individuals, businesses, and community groups as well as Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops have all provided helping hands. "We keep that place as pristine as we can," Cavanaugh says. "We've been blessed. A lot of local businesses have been very generous with donating equipment and supplies."

The arboretum hosts several events throughout the year, including the city's Arbor Day celebration coming up on April 20. The event includes a short ceremony, tree planting demonstrations, children's activities, and guided tours with tree experts. They also host Autumn Fest in October and occasional workshops throughout the year.

With approximately 100 different species of trees spread throughout the property, the wooded wonderland is a rich resource for people seeking to learn about different varieties of trees, discover how to properly plant and care for their trees, or research which trees will be best for their yards. "Trees are one of the largest assets in the city of Chesapeake," Johnson says explaining how they keep the environment healthy, provide a habitat for wildlife, create economic opportunity, and contribute to the cleanliness of the Chesapeake Bay. "The arboretum ties all of that together," he says.

Because of the vital role that trees

play in the overall health of the city, the board has worked to ensure "every day is arbor day" by growing and planting trees around the city throughout the year. The trees are grown in a nursery on the property until they are ready to be planted. Currently, they have approximately 1,500 trees in the nursery.

One added benefit of having all those trees—the canopy that stretches across the arboretum provides a shaded escape from the heat in the summer. "On hot days when it is 95 degrees, it is usually 10 degrees cooler under the canopy," Cavanaugh says.

He encourages nature enthusiasts to check out the arboretum if they have never visited and to consider membership in the Friends of the Chesapeake Arboretum whose annual dues help support the maintenance of the property. Membership includes advance notice of arboretum activities, a Chesapeake Arboretum decal, invitations to members-only tours and events, and periodical giveaways of plant bulbs, tree seedlings, nursery discounts and re-usable bags. Volunteers are also always welcome to help with maintenance of the property, he says, with no special expertise required.

"It's a fun place to be," Johnson says. "It's good to get back to nature. We welcome everybody to come out and just enjoy it."

The Chesapeake Arboretum is located at 624 Oak Grove Road. For more information, call (757) 382-7060 or visit www.chesarbor.org.

