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Get out in the cold

Longwood Gardens, Hershey Gardens and Morris Arboretum plant seeds for magical Christmas traditions

By Diane W. Stoneback, Of The Morning Call

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Visiting Longwood Gardens, Hershey Gardens or the gardens at Morris Arboretum at this time of year is like walking into a Christmas card and emerging with the comfort and joy of the holiday season.

All three manage this magic by providing special experiences for families that could become roots for new Christmas traditions — viewing twinkling lights and trains on an outdoor garden railway dusted with fresh snow, listening to carols while strolling among Christmas trees, kissing beneath Victorian-style kissing balls in a town known for Kisses or entering a gingerbread world filled with sweet temptations.

In addition to beautiful holiday decorations and special programs, the three gardens possess natural beauty that transcends the holiday. Because Jack Frost has snuffed the life from the last of autumn's flowers and stripped the leaves from the trees, spending time outdoors becomes a refreshing way to learn about the architecture of trees — their basic structure and bark — plus the ever-green qualities of pines and the colorful berries appearing on some bushes and trees at this time of year.

Longwood Gardens

Like a stunning Christmas bouquet, Kennett Square's Longwood blooms with the largest selection of indoor and outdoor holiday festivities, building on a gingerbread fantasy theme. Because so many holiday visitors are expected, this is the first time that all Longwood guests will be required to purchase timed admission tickets specifying the day and time they plan to visit.

"The Christmas season is our biggest time of the year. Because of the turnout we expect, we're requiring, rather than encouraging, timed tickets to limit the number of people who are here at one time. We want to create a place where visitors can escape to another world, rather than stressing them out with crowds and waits in long lines," says Paul Redman, Longwood's director.

Last year, 268,000 visitors toured Longwood during the Christmas season. This year, 275,000 or more are expected.

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New this year is the sweet focus on gingerbread that will be center stage in the Music Room within Longwood's 4-acre indoor Conservatory. Other enhanced experiences this year are a luminarium walk along lantern-lit pathways near and around the Main Fountain Garden, and expanded light displays near the garden's two treehouses, which remain open through the season.

The Music Room's display is enough to stir visions of sugar plums in anyone's mind, thanks to the incredible gingerbread re-creations of two Longwood landmarks — the Conservatory and the Pierce du Pont house — as well as entire trees made of gingerbread cookies, garlands of gingerbread men dancing in the room's Christmas trees, the sugar-laden Gingerbread Express train rounding tracks encircling the trees, and the huge glass jars filled with enough candy to decorate a zillion more gingerbread houses.

Gingerbread men peer out of still more wreaths and garlands in other Longwood locations. Longwood's baker turned out 11,000 gingerbread men, which required 384 pounds of flour, 192 tablespoons of cinnamon, 120 pounds of brown sugar and 100 pounds of butter.

There are big numbers in other displays within the heated Conservatory, too. Thousands of poinsettias are accented with narcissus, begonias, cyclamen and tulips. Thousands more lights hang from the Exhibition Hall's vaulted ceiling. The Conservatory has a towering 22-foot Christmas tree and three more trees ranging in height from 15 to 20 feet.

Although it'll be cold, more twinkling lights and attractions will warm your heart outside. Some 113 trees and tree forms are wrapped with lights and beautifully lighted fountains appear to dance to the music in the Open Air Theatre (weather permitting). An outdoor train display is near the Idea Garden, and there are two particularly special outdoor trees — The Wildlife Tree with gourds, seedpods and pine cones for the garden's feathered and furry friends and the Gardener's Tree featuring more ornaments fashioned from garden findings.

Longwood wraps up the season with a full schedule of organ sing-alongs and choir and handbell performances as well as breakfasts with Santa and family-friendly programming for New Year's Eve.

Hershey Gardens and Morris Arboretum

Although not as abundant with showy decorations as Longwood, both the Morris Arboretum in Chestnut Hill and the Hershey Gardens in Hershey offer enjoyable seasonal attractions. Either will provide great backdrops for family photos that can become the focus of your Christmas cards next year (or this year, if you're a last-minute mailer).

Hershey's Winter Walk awaits guests every weekend through Dec. 30. Along the way, visitors will see eight festive "kissing balls" hanging from archways, 10 themed Christmas trees and 16 specially decorated community Christmas trees whose creators are vying for visitors' votes and prizes in the second annual "Trim a Tree" contest.

Hershey also is hosting "Classic Christmas" 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Dec. 10, with activities and entertainment for the entire family. Children can make and take home birds they fashion from pine cones and other natural trimmings and experience a "wild animal encounter" with a live skunk from the ZooAmerica North American Wildlife Park (which also is open during the holidays). Adults can learn to make bows of all sizes and everyone can warm up around a flaming yule log with hot cocoa and snacks.

Morris Arboretum's Garden Railway has become the Holiday Garden Railway with painstaking attention to detail. The building's windows and doors have been decorated with festive miniature garlands. Lighted "candles" have been placed inside windows. Festive touches have been added to model trains,

including brightly-wrapped presents piled onto flatcars and a red caboose with a painted "Merry Christmas!" wish on its sides. A dusting of fresh snow would complete the holiday scenes.

The railway display, containing a quarter mile of track and 15 different train lines, two cable cars and model trains, has been created using all-natural materials such as bark, leaves, twigs, hollow logs, mosses and stones. The layout, established on natural terrain that includes a hillside, also contains two cable cars and nine bridges. One trestle is so tall that you can walk under it.

Two special events scheduled during the holiday season are a visit by the the Penn Glee Club, whose members will sing holiday-themed music in the winter garden at 2 p.m. Dec. 10, and a Holiday Hat Parade at 4 p.m. Dec. 17 that kicks off two weeks of extended hours (from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. instead of 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.).

The best times to see the railway are on gray December days and at dusk when lights on the layout and inside the buildings really sparkle. Iana Mitchell Turner, horticulturist and the section director in charge of the railway, says "There's a charm to the railway any time. I've learned that no matter how bad the weather is or how hard I've been working, any problems I have are quickly forgotten when I see the joy the children get out of it."

HERSHEY GARDENS

- What:** Winter Walk featuring kissing balls, decorated Christmas trees and special programs.
- Where:** 170 Hotel Road, Hershey
- When:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dec. 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30
- How much:** \$10, ages 13-61; \$9, seniors; \$7, ages 3-12
- Tip 1:** Classic Christmas, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Dec. 10 with crafts for kids, wild animal encounter and carolers in the garden. Warm up around a flaming Yule Log. Beverages and snacks for purchase.
- Tip 2:** Create a festive holiday centerpiece at 10 a.m. Dec. 17. Cost of \$45 includes greens and flowers. Pre-register at 717-508-5972
- Info:** <http://www.hersheygardens.org>, 717-534-3492

LONGWOOD GARDENS

- What:** A gingerbread fantasy of ornaments and houses inside the Music Room, plus gorgeous floral displays, illuminated fountains, daily and evening concert and stunning floral exhibits.
- Where:** 1001 Longwood Road, Kennett Square
- When:** Through Jan. 8, but admission is restricted to the day and time listed on your timed admission ticket.
- How much:** \$25, adults; \$22, seniors; \$11 ages 5-18, during peak times (Saturdays and Dec.26-31). \$18, adults; \$15, seniors; \$8, youth, all other days
- Tip 1:** Buy your timed tickets online, well in advance. Peak- time tickets sell out quickly.

•**Tip 2:** Breakfast with Santa in the ballroom at 8:30 or 10 a.m. Dec. 10, 11, 17 and 18. Reservations required and prices include Gardens admission. Tickets are \$40, ages 12 and over; \$22, ages 5-11; \$5, ages 1-5.

•**Tip 3:** Family New Year's Eve, 3-10 p.m., with festive activities, including carolers, jugglers, magicians, handbell choir and a five-minute fireworks display at 6 p.m.

•**Tip 4:** For full listing of concerts and organ sing-alongs, see the website.

•**Info:** <http://www.longwoodgardens.org>, 610-388-1000

MORRIS ARBORETUM OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

•**What:** Holiday Garden Railway Display with loops, tunnels, bridges and a trestle bridge you can walk under, with display and buildings all made from natural materials to form a miniature landscape. Trains and two cable cars run on a quarter-mile of track.

•**Where:** 100 E. Northwestern Ave., Chestnut Hill

•**When:** 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., through Dec. 6; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Dec. 7-31. Closed Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year's Day

•**How much:** \$16, adults; \$14, seniors, students and ages 13-18; \$7, ages 3-12

•**Tip 1:** At 2 p.m. Dec. 10 the University of Pennsylvania Glee Club will sing seasonal songs in the winter garden.

•**Tip 2:** Pack your camera to get photos of the kids that could be art for your next Christmas card.

•**Tip 3:** Holiday hat parade at 4 p.m. Dec. 17 kicks off garden railway's extended hours. Wear cozy clothes and festive hats for a parade to the railway. Remember your flashlights!

•**Tip 4:** Garden's holiday lighting really twinkles on dark, winter days and at dusk.

•**Info:** <http://www.morrisarboretum.org>, 215-247-5777

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