

From humble beginnings, Garden d’Lights blossoms

By Christina Faine, Parks and Community Services Public Information Officer

The Garden d’Lights is one of Bellevue’s signature events, drawing more than 100,000 visitors to the Bellevue



Garden d’Lights lights up.

Botanical Garden over 36 nights with a dazzling array of plants and animals fashioned out of colored lights.

But it wasn’t always this way.

In 1994, before a life-size delphinium made out of rebar and Christmas lights was a twinkle in anyone’s eye, Bellevue’s parks director, Lee Springgate, had a problem – the Botanical Garden was virtually empty in the winter months, despite its variety of beautiful gardens. He asked Nancy Kartes, the Garden manager, to change that.

Kartes, a horticulturist who started her career at Hawaii’s National Tropical Botanical Garden, came up with the idea of recreating a botanically correct garden made with lights.

Garden d’Lights debuted that winter, with a few twinkly lights draped on rhododendron bushes and several clusters of purple lights recreating a wisteria vine placed on an arbor by the Shorts’ house, the old visitor center.

It wasn’t an instant hit, and features such as a gingerbread house contest and the Swedish festival of lights, Santa Lucia, were added in various years to induce visitors.

The event began to expand in dramatic ways in the 2000s, when the dozens of volunteers who support the Garden, led by a Garden d’Lights chairperson, started

making creatures such as bunnies and squirrels. Visitors loved it. A snap dragon was created and modified over time with humps and features such as smoke.

“Every new volunteer chair added their own flair and creativity,” said Kartes. “They took the basic concepts of how to bundle and cluster the lights and expanded on that concept broadly.”

New light creations have been added over the years, including waterfalls, ponds, spiders, peacocks, flowers, salmon, squirrels and a fire-breathing dragon.

“One challenge is how you make it fresh each year and have major features that people look forward to seeing,” said Cleo Raulerson, who is chairing the event this year. Her team promises additions including day lilies, brussels sprouts and “poultry.”

It takes more than half a million lights to produce Garden d’Lights. Approximately 130 volunteers donate 6,400 hours over an 11-month period to create the displays. They use incandescent and LED (which use less electricity) lights, zip ties and rebar.

The crowds have continued to grow over the years. An admission fee and reservation system was added in the mid-2000s to spread out the visitors.

“This has become a beloved family tradition for so many people in Bellevue,” said Kartes. “People who started coming as children are now grown up, bringing their own kids. It has become a holiday tradition for families.”

This year, Garden d’Lights will run from Nov. 28 through Jan. 2, 4:30-9:30 p.m., every evening including holidays. For more information, go to www.Gardenlights.org or call 425-452-6844.



From left, Betty Peltzer and Monica Privat work on light assemblies.



Bellevue Parks & Community Services