



# Visit U.S. Largest Annual Gardens

by Kelley Anne Mc Gee

Autumn's a funny time. For some it means the return of hectic routines and crazy school schedules once again for the kids. But for others, the love affair with summer just continues thanks to the mild weather and temperatures that occur during an "Indian summer", and some of us look forward to reclaiming a more peaceful, and less crowded Jersey Shore. If you're looking for something different and relaxing to do there, fall's a nice time to visit the US largest annual gardens.

Located on Route 9 North in Swainton (a.k.a. Cape May Courthouse), in Cape May County, NJ, you'll find Leaming's Run Gardens. The U.S. largest annual gardens feature over 30 acres of lush green lawns, 25 themed gardens including English cottage style, plants, forests and pathways leading to a series of ponds, bridges, and gazebos, among surrounding wildlife, and with park benches along the way for resting.

Also on the premises is an authentically recreated colonial farm, which contains a rustic, one-room log cabin, a vegetable and herb garden, along with historically correct farm animals such as goats and roosters, whose ancestors originated from Europe and were brought over by early settlers, which is reflected in their coloring. Tobacco and cotton grow there now, just as they did in 1695, and for a second, you're back in time and can imagine what life then must've

been like.

During the colonial period, early European settlers and whalers in Cape May County, had to depend on farming and raising their own crops in order to survive. The colonial farm at Leaming's Run Gardens is an example of living history, and just such a place.



Scenes from Leaming's Run Gardens Cape May, NJ.

The historic Thomas Leaming House (circa 1706) is the last remaining whaler's home in NJ, and one of the oldest in Cape May County. Although its interior is not open to the public as it's a private home, its handsome exterior can still be viewed as you stroll the grounds.

Leaming's Run Gardens is named for the

stream, which flows across its land. During colonial times, the stream was known as "Uncle Aaron Leaming's Run." Three generations of Leaming's lived and worked here as farmers, and some also on the nearby waterfront as whalers, and eventually died here as well. Their grave markers can be seen and are part of the tour.

In 1957, Jack and Emily Aprill along with their young family, purchased the then 50 woodland acres and historic Thomas Leaming Home. They envisioned creating and designing a beautiful public garden, preserving the unique history here, as well as the natural environment, and in time, sharing it with others. It took them and their children, about five years of research, hard work and dedication to achieve their dream and goal, eventually turning their land into spectacular and breathtaking gardens, and, over time, opening it to the public.

The gardens eventually became a big hit and success, and have often been featured in various magazine and newspaper articles, on TV news shows, entertainment segments and gardening programs.† The gardens have also served as an inspiration to seashore gardeners such as Steve

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*Your unaided view*

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Murray, designer of Hereford Inlet Lighthouse's gardens. Today, the gardens are largely overseen by their youngest son Gregg Aprill and daughter-in-law Missie, although Jack and Emily are still never too far away to lend a hand or any advice.

In August and as late as September, ruby-throated hummingbirds make this their temporary home, and bird lovers can expect to see many other varieties and waterfowl as well. Also, observe rare and common animal life, insects and plants such as fish, eels, frogs, turtles, butterflies, dragonflies, mushrooms, cinnamon ferns, centuries-old oaks, hollies, pines, in addition to more recently planted bamboo forests.

Throughout their season, which runs from May until October, you can enjoy several programs and events such as colonial hearth cooking demonstrations, or meeting a turtle singer along with her turtle friends. Call ahead for schedule of events.

Also, the gardens are available for private wedding ceremonies, family portraits, special theme guided tours, as a classroom for nature studies, or as an natural and inspirational studio for art or photography students, and as a pretty or romantic backdrop for personalized catered meals served in the gazebo area for special occasions such as an anniversary.

Fees, times, days and availabilities may vary, advanced reservations required.

Leaming's Run Gardens is open daily from May 15 to October 20, 9:30 am to 5:00 pm. Please note, schedule may be subject to changes, best to check ahead. A reasonable admission fee is charge for adults and children, and kids under six are admitted free. Both guided and self-guided tours are



available, call ahead for guided tour requests and or information.

Picnic sites on the grounds if you wish to take a break, and have a drink or bite to eat. However no food is sold here, but several fast food restaurants are about five miles away. An antique barn houses a gift shop, which sells items like dried floral arrangements and books about gardening. There's free parking on the premises.

Don't forget to wear comfortable walking shoes, sunscreen, bug repellent, binoculars, and to bring your camera along for lots of great photo opportunities. Gardens are handicapped and stroller accessible. Portable restrooms on the premises, but might be a good idea to bring along some disposable towelettes for substitute hand washing. Please note that bathrooms are not handicapped accessible.

Also, in October, Leaming's Run Gardens, is turned into a spooky forest for Halloween fun. Screaming's Run, is regarded as one of South Jersey's best haunted attractions, and folks often compared it to something you might see or experience at Disney World. The popular guided candlelit tours take place evenings on the last two weekends, Fridays and Saturdays in October 7:00 pm to 11:00 pm.

Beware of an eerie undertaker or decayed gardener, who may act as your guide, and will take you by way of candlelight through haunted forests filled with ghosts, goblins and ghouls. Good old-fashioned and scary fun for all ages. A reasonable admission fee is charged, and they can accommodate groups of any size. Special group rates are available.

For additional information on visiting Leaming's Run Gardens or Screaming's Run, please contact Phone: 609-465-5871 or visit website: [www.leafmingsrun.com](http://www.leafmingsrun.com).

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