

The gardens at McMenamins  
Edgefield in Troutdale, Oregon.

# GROWING CONNECTIONS

Breweries are finding fertile partnerships  
with gardeners and plant collectors.

Story by JOSHUA M. BERNSTEIN



Kathleen Nyberg

# Normally, there's no real good reason to leave Santa Barbara, California, and drive due north on Mission Canyon Road in search of great beer.

Bars and taprooms are absent on this scenic residential stretch in the Santa Ynez Mountains, succulents outnumbering humans by a hundredfold. But on a misty Saturday morning in March, cars and buses cruise through the canyon toward the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. That day, the 78-acre expanse temporarily transforms into the Beer Garden, a festival that encourages attendees to stroll past California plants—and drink them too.

Prior to the event, the garden's horticultural staff toured area brewers and restaurateurs through the 900-plus species of flora, including hummingbird sage, snowberry, purple needlegrass, and California poppy. Engaging every sense is encouraged. "They're tasting and smelling," says SBBG executive director Steve Windhager, standing before a panoramic Pacific Ocean view. The grounds aren't totally a garden buffet. "We're telling them what's poisonous and what's not."

I take my tasting glass and join the 400 attendees on a winding tasting path. I first try Topa Topa Brewing's piney Level Line pale ale finished with yerba buena, a member of the mint family. It adds an unexpected herbaceous zing, less toothpaste than lively freshness. The striking flowers of woolly bluecurls, an evergreen shrub, lend a mix of candied lavender, mint, and pine to Island Brewing's HopLiner IPA. No herbs are added to Draughtsmen Aleworks's Nama Biru rice lager. It's spritzed, post-pour, with an atomizer of desert lavender—infused water. "This is a floral beer, so we add flowers to it," says Draughtsmen Aleworks co-founder Scott Stefan.

The symmetry makes sense as I sample the garden, the connection between beer and the botanical expanse always at hand. The youthful crowd is lively and engaged, and conversations run from conservation to why fruity hummingbird sage excels in IPAs. "When we first started this event [in 2013], the garden was still sleepy," Windhager says. "It was mostly the place that your grandmother likes to come to. And when your grandmother came to visit, you take her once a year. But since starting this event, we've really been able to attract a younger crowd. The event brings people back year after year."

As modern beer took root in America in the 1970s and '80s, a culture coalesced around drinking and exploring everything ale and lager. Beer festivals, bars, and shops arose to meet the nation's quickly fermenting curiosity, home brewers commandeering basements and kitchens. Like beer? That hobby could be a new personality. Craft beer steadily spread nationwide and wrapped its tendrils around new subcultures, and taprooms in time welcomed fans of heavy metal, drag performances, knitting, hip-hop, and more.

Now a rapidly growing subgroup is cross-pollinated by gardening, houseplants, and beer. Breweries are creating lush taprooms that host plant sales and swaps, drawing crowds to trade cuttings and cultivate community. Collaborations with gardeners are leading brewers to make beers with atypical fruits and herbs, such as miniature melons and lemon thyme. Botanical gardens are joining forces with breweries on herbaceous beers. And if you crave a cold IPA while shopping for houseplants, stores like Fifth Season Gardening's Asheville Market sell native plants and local beer. "Beer and gardening seem to go together," says general manager Clare Schwartz.



I've consumed beer for decades, but I didn't garden until New York City locked down during that dreadful pandemic spring. Stuck inside my Brooklyn apartment, trying to homeschool a first-grader while reporting on pivoting breweries, my anxiety reached overdrive. With nowhere to go, I retreated into my wee backyard and chopped down a spiky annatto tree, eradicated weeds, and built garden beds. Nurturing basil, lettuce, and Brussels sprouts buoyed my mental health, as did reassuring strolls through the nearby Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Modern life might've been a mess, but nature stuck to its seasonal clockwork.

"I really appreciated that we could still be open and have people come and find refuge in the gardens," says Kim Kincaid, the gardens director at McMenamans Edgefield, a resort in Troutdale, Oregon, about 20 minutes east of Portland. The 74-acre property was built in 1911 as Multnomah County Poor Farm, which used farming to help the indigent become self-sufficient. Wild blackberries overran the grounds when McMenamans, known for rehabilitating historic properties, began restoring the farmstead with groves of fir trees, herb and vegetable gardens, flower beds, and vineyards. "Our job is to nurture the garden and hope our efforts are reflected back to those who wander and ponder the garden," says Kincaid, who began at Edgefield in 1991.

Guests are encouraged to amble with wine or beer produced on site. (Edgefield also operates a distillery.) Brewery manager Will Gaither works closely with Edgefield gardeners to incorporate harvests into his beer, particularly his spontaneously fermented wild ales. "Early in the year, we'll get together and talk about what they can grow for us and what we'd like to produce," Gaither says. His estate-harvest combinations include mulberries and lemon verbena, palm-size Tigger melons and blackberries, and both English and lemon cucumbers with cardinal basil. "This series has become more of a partnership with the gardeners."



Images from the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden's Beer Garden fundraiser in March. Top left: Santa Barbara beer enthusiast Vern Rodriguez with Third Window Brewing's Wild Ale, made with native bay laurel and desert lavender, and Little Doms oysters (pictured middle left). Top middle: Beer cocktails Kolsch Encounters of the Third Kind (left) and Pineapple & Sage. Bottom left: Tom Bezek, a beer and garden enthusiast from Minnesota. Bottom right: Night Lizard Brewing's Saison, made with native Amethyst Bluff sage.



All photos: Silas Falstich



Wild Heaven brewmaster Eric Johnson in the Atlanta Botanical Garden, holding a can of their collaborative Garden Beer.

Andrew Thomas Lee

Alliances between breweries and botanic gardens are blooming like dandelions in the spring. At the Humboldt Botanical Garden in Eureka, California, local brewery Lost Coast sponsors the Native Plant Garden. Moore Farms Botanical Garden in Lake City, South Carolina, operates an annual beer festival on its property, and Boise's Idaho Botanical Gardens hosts the Shade City Brewfest. Atlanta Botanical Garden partners with area brewery Wild Heaven on the ongoing Garden Beer that's inspired by the garden's seasonal abundance. "Through this collaboration, we're hoping to get people excited about the garden and gardening," says Wild Heaven co-founder and brewmaster Eric Johnson.

Johnson might be American brewing's best gardening spokesperson. Prior to co-founding Wild Heaven in 2010, the horticulturist worked as a plant breeder, cloning oak trees, before becoming host of the PBS show *Garden Smart*, now in its 18<sup>th</sup> season. He's been filming across America and western Europe, collecting knowledge and rare edible plants in his journeys. "That connection to gardening and horticulture is as important to who I am as a brewer as anything," says Johnson, who looks at brewing as an opportunity to introduce drinkers to less-common ingredients like star anise and Mexican tarragon. Beer is a "white canvas to paint on with botanical flavors."

The multihyphenate designs beers by cooking with novel produce and walking through the Atlanta Botanical Garden, exploring what's in season and blooming. "The things that grow together, go together," he says. For the latest Garden Beer, his 12<sup>th</sup>, he created a Belgian-style white ale seasoned with toasted sesame, cucumber, and a lemon thyme extraction made by macerating the leaves in añejo tequila. "I love secondary and tertiary flavors when it comes to bringing the garden into the beer," he says. "I don't want any of those flavors to be jagged." Johnson's home garden, which features five kinds of tarragon, around 15 mint varieties, and too much thyme to count, also fuels his Wild Heaven beers. He grew the Garden Beer's lemon thyme for the ninth edition, plus the nasturtium flower that lent a white peppercorn pop to a floral saison that also contained sumac and cornflower. "My gardening side really stimulates the creativity in the brewing side."



Collecting houseplants can quickly become an obsession. A pothos can be a gateway to a towering fiddle-leaf fig, a tropical monstera, and several dozen succulents that fill every surface in your southern-exposure bedroom. (Guilty as charged.) Is that enough? Never, especially for some brewers.

Hops and grains begin life in the ground, and the brewing process creates a tactile connection to

agriculture. "Being in the beer industry lends itself to liking plants," says Rahul Cherian, the head brewer at Peabody Heights in Baltimore. Cherian favors tropical plants, no distance too great to get unusual specimens. "I drove to Buffalo and back just to pick up a variegated bird of paradise," Cherian says, a journey that's some six hours each direction. In time, proud plant parents can become overwhelmed plant grandparents, or great-grandparents, too many offspring to feed and nurture. "You end up with so many little [propagations] and cuttings," Cherian says. "It's nice to be able to share them."

In March, Cherian brought excess plants to the brewery's inaugural Baltimore Plant Swap, an event jump-started by local plant enthusiasts connecting with brewery owner Eddie O'Keefe. The brewery tested the concept on a Sunday afternoon, and around 350 people showed up. "Our sales were more than triple what they would have been on a normal day," says events director Marshall Lilly, adding that the brewery now hosts a monthly plant meetup. "We quickly learned how enthusiastic that community is in Baltimore."

Brewery plant swaps are now taking root at Ghost River in Memphis, Torn Label in Kansas City, and Great Raft in Shreveport, Louisiana. Living Häus Beer in Portland, Oregon, hosts a plant swap every other month in its sunbathed taproom and gives away cuttings from its collection of more than 200 plants that include snake plants, rubber trees, and ferns. All that verdant foliage can soften a brewery's sometimes-tough industrial edges, setting a more serene stage for sipping beer. Welcome to our jungle. Care for a kölsch?

"The plants give our environment more of a dynamic feel," says co-founder Conrad Andrus. The tall-ceilinged taproom has roll-up doors and large fans but lacks air-conditioning, a mixed bag for customers and greenery. Heat rises. Humidity happens. "It's great for all the plants," says co-founder Mat Sandoval. Life expectancy proves his point. Since opening last July, the brewery has only lost a single plant thanks to the resident plant caretaker, Benjamin June. He visits the brewery weekly to water, lightly prune, and instruct. "He helps educate us on what our plants individually need," says Sandoval.

Today's brewery taprooms encourage customers to exit through the gift shop and grab four-packs and baseball hats for the road. Or maybe you'd like that String of Dolphins succulent dangling by the water station. "They look like little dolphins flying through the air," says Megan Nance, the co-founder of Roots to Rise, a mobile plant shop in Georgetown, Texas, with a newly launched physical shop on Rock Street. Nance and her husband, Collins, debuted last October with outdoor pop-ups at local festivals and events, and at local brewery Barking Armadillo. That led to Nance selling plants inside the taproom, a fertile sales

environment. “It’s helped snowball my business,” says Nance, who also sells plants at a local salon and another brewery. Nance also introduced a popular Plants & Pints night at Barking Armadillo that partners beer with potting plants. After a stressful day, “there’s something cathartic about sticking your hands in the dirt.”



Craft beer has become an added-value attraction to most every errand. Customers can drink fresh IPAs while loading carts with the weekly groceries, or during a trip to a barbershop for a snip. Laundromats double as beer bars, and now plant shops do too.

Plant Pub opened in Lafayette, Indiana, last year, and many of PlantHouse’s 10 locations across the Southeast also feature a PlantBar, plus workshops like “Boozy Bonsai.” Fifth Season Gardening’s Asheville location features a popular bar that offers at least eight beers from regional breweries including Foothills, Pisgah, and Hi-Wire. “People come in and are like, ‘Oh my God, that’s brilliant. I’m going to plant shop and drink a beer,’” says general manager Clare Schwartz. “People wander through the tropical plant section and end up with a couple things to take home.” The shop’s beer connection makes sense if you examine the shelves stocked with supplies for making beer, wine, kombucha, and sake. “We’re the alternative hobby store,” says beer and bar manager Tanner Frizzell.

Jen Adams clearly understands the correlation between gardening and beer. Adams worked in marketing for Tröegs Independent Brewing for seven years before leaving last year to become chief marketing officer for Burpee Gardening, a plant and seed supplier. Like beer, gardening is “a passion category that brings people joy,” says Adams, who built raised-bed gardens at home during the pandemic. At Tröegs, Adams noted how customers were keen to learn about new hops and brewing techniques in the brewery’s R&D Scratch beers. Burpee has a robust plant-breeding program, and new varieties can stir the same excitement as a limited-edition double IPA. This spring, gardeners clamored for Burpee’s Rise and Shine squash that grows vertically, not horizontally, making it great for cramped gardens. “We can’t keep it in stock,” Adams says. “It’s interesting to see what goes viral in gardening versus beer.”

Arizona Wilderness Brewing is no stranger to viral fame. RateBeer.com named it the world’s best new brewery in 2014, and co-founders Jonathan Buford and Patrick Ware traveled the world for their *Into the Wilderness* TV show. Buzz fades, but the brewery’s

foundational commitment to making beers with the state’s agricultural bounty endures. The brewery builds beers from local Sinagua Malt and adds native ingredients such as prickly pear juice, white Sonoran berries, and foraged creosote flowers. Since opening, “our goal has been to celebrate the outdoors, the diversity of Arizona’s landscapes, and our love for it,” says Buford, the CEO.

In 2020, the conservation-minded brewery partnered with the local chapter of the National Audubon Society to transform the brewery’s Phoenix outpost into a bird-friendly beer garden. “Downtown Phoenix is built on the dammed Salt River,” Buford says. “Hummingbirds used to come to the Salt and no longer can.” To create an urban refuge, the local group identified native plants that are beneficial to hummingbirds and pollinators like butterflies, including desert milkweed and the flowering Parry’s Penstemon and Chuparosa. “We have these wonderful displays of local flowers that are bird friendly,” Buford says, “but they’re not trample-resistant.” There’s heavy weekend traffic—upward of 1,500 guests is normal—and not everyone watches where they walk. The local group returns every quarter to replant, an ongoing lesson in the challenges of gardening.

Caring for plants requires repeated failure. Leaves will droop, brown, and drop. Succulents will shrivel. Slugs will devour your lettuce, and then aphids will come for the kale. Learning curves are steep, and you can kill plants with too much kindness—and watering as well. “It’s like any other hobby,” Nance says. “You’re going to suck at it when you start.” A cold beer can serve as a salve or a reward, plants turned into pleasure. Beer is a liquid reminder of what’s possible when agriculture goes according to plan.

Back in Santa Barbara, as the botanic garden’s beer festival nears its annual end, I wander to a grove of redwood trees shrouded in dense spectral fog. Some of the redwoods are nearly a century old, and the tallest tops out at around 160 feet. The majestic giants typically favor cool and damp coastal weather, but the shady canyon offers an ideal microclimate to survive and thrive. Nearby I find Tarantula Hill Brewing, which is serving a West Coast IPA with a piney boost from fresh redwood tips—nature nurturing a new beer. The resinous IPA syncs with the cinematic setting to form an indelible pairing, a moment that sticks in my mind long after the last sticky sip.

“What makes this event work so well is the space,” director Steve Windhager says. “You can’t replicate what the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden does anywhere else.” ■



This photo: Arizona Wilderness Brewing partners with a local chapter of the Audubon Society to create a bird-friendly beer garden. Top right and bottom left: A plant swap at Peabody Heights in Baltimore. Bottom right: Wild Heaven’s Belgian White Ale Season 12, a collaboration with Atlanta Botanical Garden.



Clockwise from top left: Kyle Ledebor, Marshall Lilly, Andrew Thomas Lee, Marshall Lilly