

Bookworm Gardens offers enchanting exploration of children's literature in Sheboygan



Hidden in the winding roads of the **University of Wisconsin-Sheboygan campus**, it's common to hear people laughing, bells ringing and drums banging. But these sounds aren't coming from a group of rowdy college students. They come from children and adults playing in **Bookworm Gardens**, a charming, literature-themed green space that offers interactive exhibits based on more than 60 children's books.

Before school kicks into high speed, parents still have time to squeeze in a day-long field trip with their children that encourages bonding and educational growth. Sheboygan — about an hour north of Milwaukee — is full of fun venues that promote interactive learning for kids with a variety of interests.

Bookworm Gardens is part of "The Sheboygan Challenge," a program created by community leaders to encourage families to take their children to experiential learning venues in Sheboygan. The game is simple: Visit a location and get a stamp on the paper passports handed out for free at each venue.

But ink stain or not, Bookworm Gardens is worth a visit, especially for children's lit lovers of all ages.

It's not quite a playground, and it's not quite a museum. Though that description suggests that it's an awkward in-between, it's not. It's simply a place where children can learn by doing what they do best: playing.

The whimsical garden seamlessly leads visitors down winding, gravel pathways, where they are met by pieces of land dedicated to various books.

At the front entrance, visitors are greeted by a tree. But it's not just any tree — it's based on Shel Silverstein's 1964 book, "**The Giving Tree.**"

The rest of the garden plays on children's book themes and offers both old and new literature relevant for all generations.

There's the octagonal gazebo-like deck on the east edge of the gardens that serves as "**The Magic Tree House.**" The wooden structure is nestled in a canopy of trees and rests at the edge of a hill, so visitors feel as if they are higher than the rest of the gardens.

The "**Curious George and the Pizza Party**" station is in the Farm Garden and features pizza ingredients in the form of fresh onion, basil and pepper plants.

And the "**Fairy Houses**" station allows children to build their own fairy house out of natural materials like twigs, leaves and shiny pebbles.

These shiny pebbles caught the attention of Colbee Entin, a 5-year-old from Deerfield, Ill., who visited Bookworm Gardens during a trip to Sheboygan with her family. She gripped the pebble along her way from the fairy houses to the "**Winnie the Pooh**" section of the gardens.

"I recognize this," she said, pointing to a small hut-like structure with a wooden Dutch door.

Many do. It's a model of Pooh's home in the 100 Aker Wood, the fictional town where the characters in "Winnie the Pooh" reside.

"Mom, look inside here!" Colbee said as she entered the hut, large enough for her and another small child.

Her mother, Lindsey Entin, shut the door.

"Excuse me?" she said, knocking on the door. "Anyone home?"

Colbee opened the door, laughing, and the pair moved on to their next destination.

Lindsey Entin said she often takes her children to educational venues around the Chicago area and was impressed by what Bookworm Gardens had to offer.

"This can hold its own (compared to larger cities)," she said.

The garden features several reading stations where spiral-bound, laminated books are stored in brick columns. These reading stations are a favorite for Amelia Dumez, a 9-year-old from Sheboygan who often visits with her grandmother, Gail Schuh of Oostburg.

"Whenever we go here, we always read '**The Story about Ping**' together," Amelia said.

She and her sister, Julia Dumez, 12, also enjoy watching the large goldfish that swim in the "**McEligot's Pool**" pond.

Schuh has been bringing her granddaughters, and the rest of her family, to Bookworm Gardens since it opened in 2010.

"What a little treasure we have here in Sheboygan," Schuh said. "Well, a big treasure now."

An idea is born

The idea for the project was conceived in 1999 by Sandy Livermore, who was intrigued by the families she saw having a great time at the **Michigan State 4-H Children's Garden** in East Lansing, Mich. When she saw a group of teenagers reading aloud to children, she envisioned this type of garden in Sheboygan County.

Bookworm Gardens receives funding from grants, fundraisers and miscellaneous donations, according to Beth Carreno, education coordinator. That includes those in the box at the entrance. Visiting the garden is free, but \$5 donations are encouraged.

Some of the garden's funding also comes from the gift shop. The charming store — near the entrance in the Hansel and Gretel Learning Cottage — features toys that will take any adult back in time: felt dolls, miniature gardening equipment and a cardboard version of "**Goodnight Moon**." And in the back, visitors can peruse hundreds of well-known books such as "**Little House on the Prairie**," "**Horton Hatches the Egg**" and "**Falling Up**."

A large portion of Bookworm Gardens' income goes to tending the garden. With 50,000 visitors in 2013 alone, the grounds are bound to get bruises in the process.

Each morning volunteers come around 6 a.m. to rake, sweep and clean the grounds. On a sunny July day, Sherry Speth, a member of the board and volunteer gardener who spends a couple of days a week at Bookworm Gardens, was spreading Sluggo on plants that were being eaten by bugs.

To keep the gardens in good shape, the staffers impose a few rules, such as visitors taking their garbage with them. On the etiquette guide at the entrance, hopping, skipping and jumping are encouraged, but running is not.

"Use your walkin' feet, sweetie," Carreno said to one child. And to another: "Slow those feet down

just a little bit."

But for the most part, Bookworm Gardens gives kids freedom to play. A widespread theme in the garden is to allow children to make their own decisions about what to explore.

"To continue to get kids engaged with not only reading but gardening, you have to start young," Speth said.

Getting started

And Bookworm Gardens does start young. The Gardens has a fairly extensive list of **summer camps** that start at age 3.

"I enjoy being a part of that a-ha moment and letting them make their own choices," said Carreno, who organizes and teaches most of the programs.

But Bookworm Gardens also facilitates programs for others, including **one for individuals with Alzheimer's or memory loss** and a **leadership program for teenagers**, who create their own lesson plans for the camps.

When school begins, the property becomes booked with **field trips** — more than 5,000 children visited on field trips in 2013. As a preschool teacher's aide, Schuh has not only brought her grandchildren, but also her students.

The property also provides ample opportunities for cute photos of the kids, either candidly playing in the gardens or posing behind large picture frames, in the multi-sized "**Goldilocks and the Three Bears**" Adirondack chairs or the "**Little House in the Big Woods**" pioneer wagon.

In the spring of 2013, Schuh brought her whole family — three generations — to the gardens to take family photos. Schuh has just about as much fun at the gardens as the children she brings.

"Our mission is for the young and the young at heart," Carreno said.

One time, Carreno and some other volunteers welcomed guests at the entrance. A small child walked up and proclaimed it was her birthday, and she wanted to spend it at Bookworm Gardens. Carreno and the other volunteers sang "Happy Birthday" to the child, and she went on her way.

Next, a woman pushed an older woman in a wheelchair up to Carreno and the volunteers. The caregiver told Carreno that it was also the older woman's birthday — her 90th.

And, of course, they sang to her, too.

IF YOU GO

Where: **Bookworm Gardens**, 1415 Campus Drive, Sheboygan, WI 53081

What: An interactive garden with themes based on various children's books

Hours: Open May 1 to Oct. 31, including holidays: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Sunday 12 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Cost: Admission is free, but donations are encouraged. Prices for field trips, camps and events vary.

Tips for visiting: The gardens are wheelchair accessible, and strollers are permitted.

There is a small parking lot, and extra parking is available in the UW-Sheboygan Theatre lot.

Picnics are welcome, but visitors must take care of their own garbage, as there is no trash service on the grounds.

For more information and to see a list of special events at Bookworm Gardens, visit the venue's season calendar at bookwormgardens.com.

Other places to visit in Sheboygan

If you have a full day or two to spend in Sheboygan, consider stopping by some of the following places:

- For the scientist: **Spaceport Sheboygan***, 802 Blue Harbor Drive
- For the adventurer: **Cosmic Bounce***, 802 Blue Harbor Drive
- For the artist: **The Artery***, 608 New York Ave.
- For the history buff: **Indian Mound Park**, 5000 S 9th St.
- For the Jack of all trades: **Above and Beyond Children's Museum***, 902 N. 8th St.
- For the logical thinker: **The Gameboard***, 1832 N. 8th St.
- For the nature enthusiast: **Kohler-Andrae State Park**, 1020 Beach Park Lane

*Part of The Sheboygan Challenge