

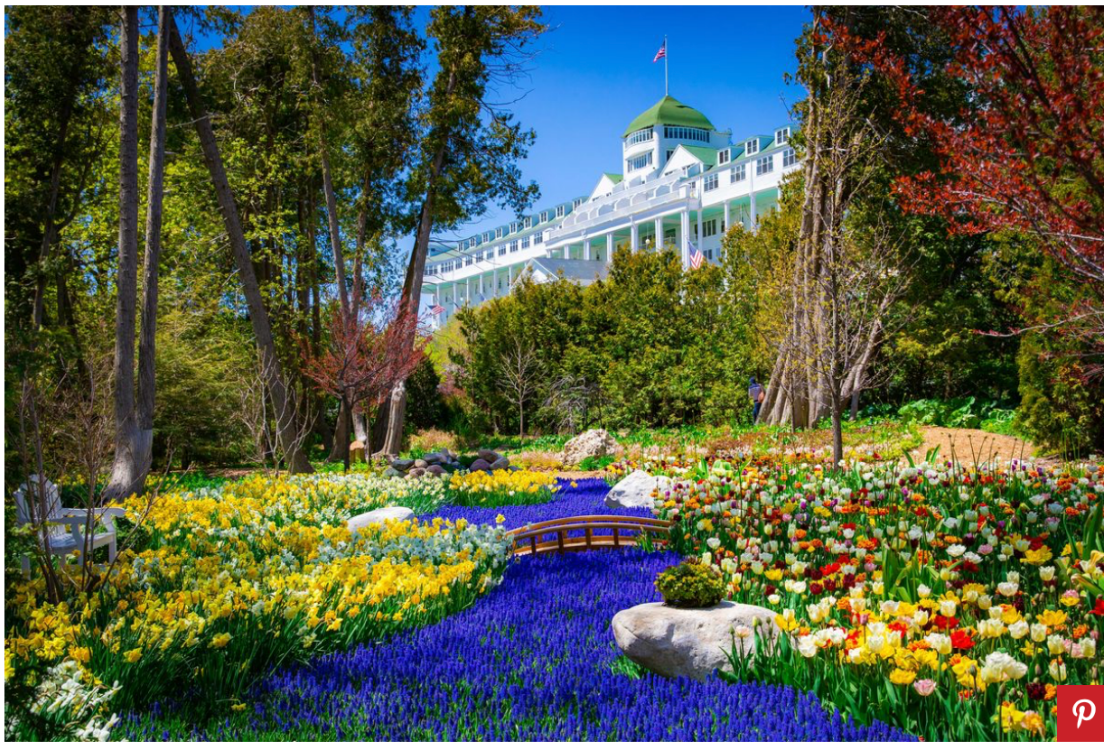
# VERANDA

## Tour the Historic Grand Hotel Gardens on Mackinac Island

Here's an insider's look at this iconic hotel's historic garden.



BY [ARRICCA ELIN SANSONE](#) PUBLISHED: FEB 23, 2023



Grand Hotel

Opened in 1887, the Grand Hotel has presided over tiny Mackinac Island for more than 135 years. First billed as a retreat from the heat for travelers arriving by rail or lake steamer from Chicago, Erie, Montreal and Detroit, the hotel has remained a bastion of tradition and beauty for guests from around the world, with nearly a million visitors per year.

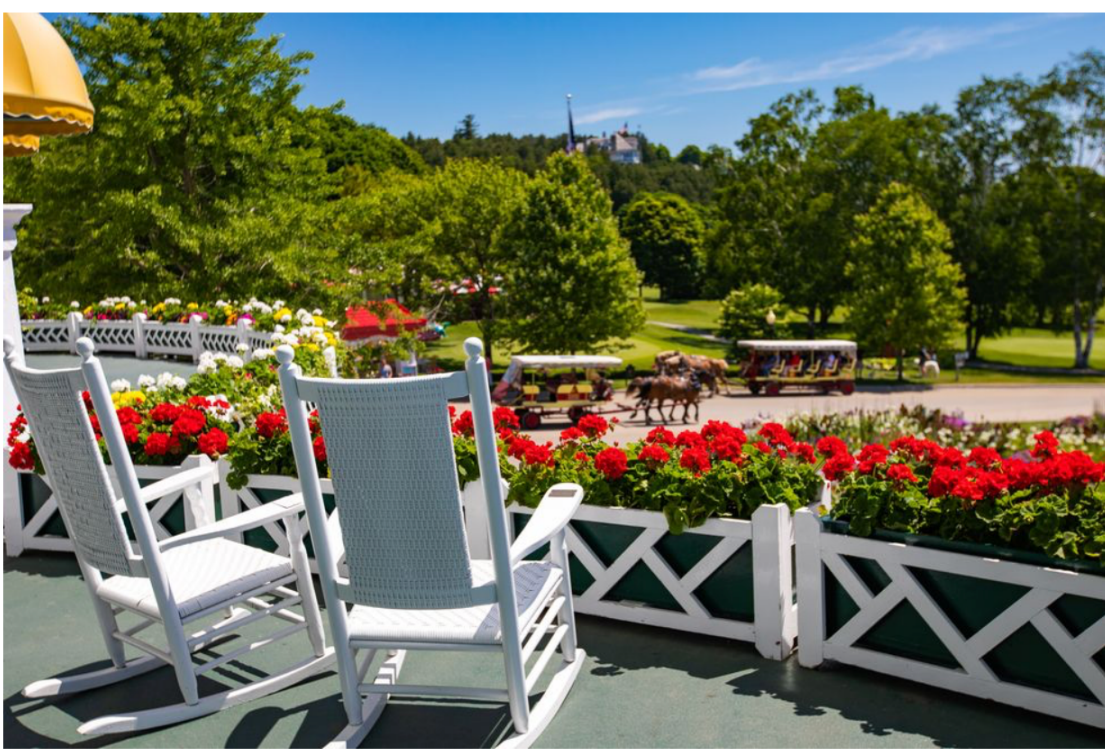
Throughout its history, the hotel has attracted everyone from Mark Twain—who lectured here in 1895—to five presidents, to couples and families who return annually to enjoy its unique ambiance. Part of the fascination is that the island is accessible only by ferry boat or plane. No motorized vehicles are permitted on the island, which means that more than 500 horses reside here in summer to transport visitors everywhere—including between the front and back nine on the hotel's golf course.



**View of the Grand Hotel's front lawn**

Grand Hotel

Another part of the hotel's allure is that no two of the 388 rooms are decorated in the same manner. This philosophy has been carried over to the gardens, renowned for the century-old lilacs, white cedars, maples, and thousands of flowers planted each year. From the more than 100,000 spring-blooming bulbs planted every fall to the more than 1,300 geraniums planted along the Grand's Front Porch (the longest in the world), guests are captivated by the colors and charm of this historic hotel and its grounds.



View from the Grand Hotel's Front Porch

Grand Hotel

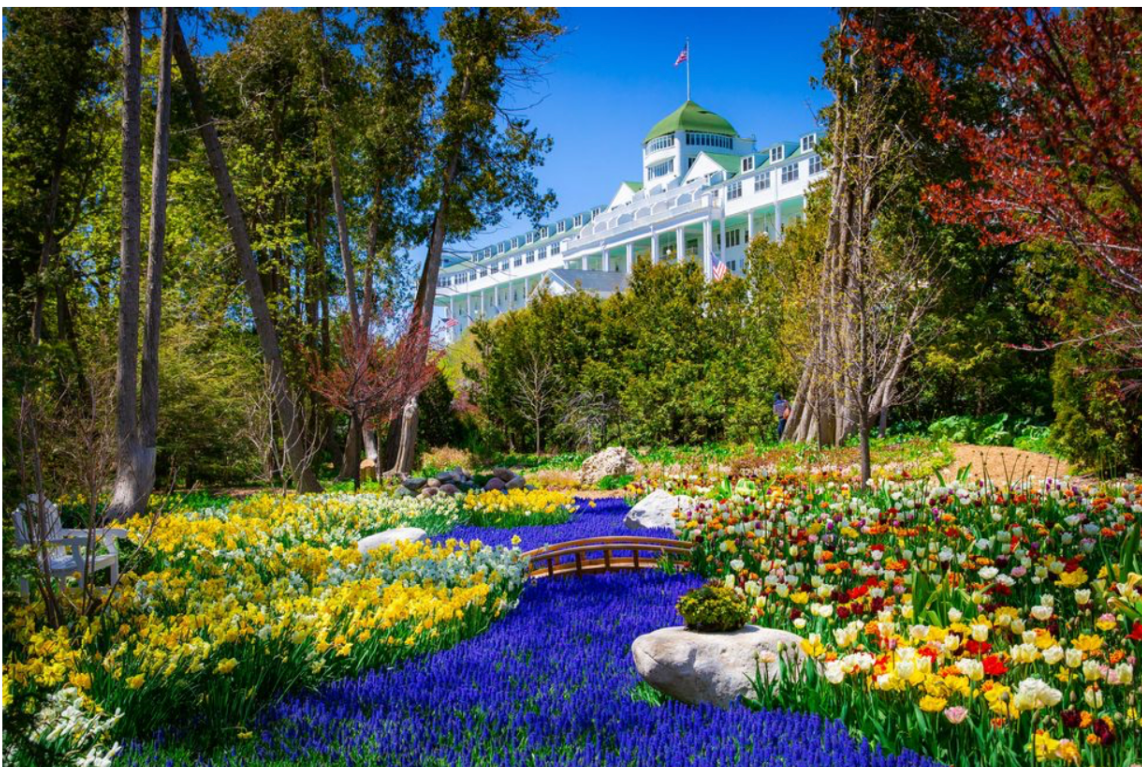
We spoke with the Grand Hotel's Drew Butterfield, senior director of landscaping, to learn how he and his staff maintain and prepare the gardens each season:

## **Garden design and planning begins more than a year in advance.**

As with any landscape, Butterfield and his crew always are renovating the gardens. "No garden is static," says Butterfield. "We're always looking at ways to improve our guests' experience. I want people to see something new every time they come, whether it's a first-time visitor or return guests."

Planning for each year's garden designs starts a minimum of 14 months ahead of time, with an emphasis on using plants that support pollinator populations. The hotel works closely with a nearby nursery, [Mischel's Greenhouses](#) in Williamsburg, Michigan, which grows all the plants.

Next come the logistical challenges. Plants have to be transported first by truck from the nursery, then by boat, then loaded onto horse-drawn carriages for delivery at the hotel. "A lot can go wrong in the transport," says Butterfield. Yet somehow, every year, Butterfield and his small crew of eight gardeners manage to produce a fairy-tale-like setting with the plantings.



Spring blooms in the Grand Hotel's Secret Garden

Grand Hotel

## **The garden contains more than 100,000 bulbs and 50,000 annuals every year.**

Butterfield and his crew plant an impressive display of spring-blooming bulbs, including more than 40,000 grape hyacinths and more than 12,000 tulips and alliums to create three weeks of peak blooms in late May. The planting has to occur in a three-week period starting October 15, which isn't always easy because their plans sometimes clash with the island's capricious autumn weather.



Grand Hotel bulb planting in fall

**Bulbs must be planted in fall, despite the island's capricious weather.**

Drew Butterfield

After the spring-blooming flowers have faded, the bulbs are dug up and given to residents to add to their own gardens. Now, more than 50,000 annuals such as geraniums, marigolds, snapdragons, cleome, dahlias and zinnias are planted in various beds throughout the property. These displays of annuals peak from July to early September.

## **Every garden on the grounds is different.**

One of Butterfield's goals is to make each outdoor space different so that visitors will enjoy wandering about to explore every garden. "Just like no two rooms are the same in the hotel, no two garden designs are the same. I like to replicate that feel outside so that the colors are as bold and vibrant as inside the hotel," says Butterfield.

Unquestionably, the most popular garden is the Secret Garden, created in 2015 in an area that was once used for compost. This quarter-acre area, enclosed by arborvitaes, is especially stunning in the spring. Although the design changes somewhat every year, it mimics the undulating feel of a river bed, created by spring bulbs in bloom. Perennials such as astilbe, ligularia and rudbeckia also adorn this space, with summer annuals such as begonias and caladiums planted once the bulbs have faded.



**One of the Grand Hotel's Triangle Garden beds**

**Grand Hotel**

Other gardens on the grounds include the Triangle Gardens, which comprise roughly 10,000 square feet of plantings; the garden beds by Sadie's Ice Cream Parlor, which have a whimsical feel; and the East and West Entry beds, which each comprise 5,000 square feet. There's also an herb garden for the restaurant culinary team to use, which includes perennial herbs such as thyme and mint, edible flowers such as nasturtiums, and beautiful hot peppers.

As you'd imagine, upkeep is nonstop. "More than an acre of annuals and perennials are maintained daily during the season," says Butterfield. Tasks such as weeding, deadheading spent blooms, and watering cannot be neglected. Depending on the amount of rainfall, thousands of feet of hose are used to water plants because irrigation is limited on the property.

# The gardens can be a source of inspiration for your own home.

One of the goals of the hotel's gardens, which are open to guests and visitors alike, is to encourage people to create their own private gardens. "Find your inspiration and start small. You're not going to plant 100,000 bulbs, but you can create your own Secret Garden on a smaller scale," says Butterfield. And if you don't have a large yard, containers allow you to create a miniature garden wherever you can fit a pot, window box, or hanging basket.

Visitors love browsing the grounds, and they always like asking about the plants. "The question I always hear is 'What should I plant in my own garden?'" says Butterfield. "I say there are no rules for gardening. If you like it, plant it. You're not trying to impress anyone so choose the colors and plants you love."

For example, a few years ago Butterfield incorporated passion vines, which aren't a traditional landscape planting, in different spots in the gardens. "They're unique and funky and alien-looking and consistent bloomers," he says. "People loved them and thought they were striking."



**The hotel's east entry beds await visitors**

Grand Hotel

While the hotel has an undeniable draw, the gardens hold their own as a focal point on this unique island. “Most people come to see the hotel as a sort of living museum, but I’ve been allowed to create gardens that also receive some of the limelight,” says Butterfield. “The opportunity to be creative and design something that affects people in very positive ways is the best part of this process.”