



IOWA'S BEST SECRET DESTINATION

The Brenton Arboretum anticipates your need for quiet enjoyment — or a chamber concert at sunset or children's birthday party — in the great outdoors.

story by DEB WILEY

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PHOTO BY JOHN HOLTORF

Ease yourself into one of the strategically placed Adirondack chairs around this 140-acre undulation of tree-filled prairie and tune in the quiet.

True, it's not *exactly* silent. A redwing blackbird trills nearby. In the distance a tractor putters. Insects buzz in a bounty of prairie flowers. A susurrus of pine needles rises gently on the wind. You may even hear the delighted giggles of children clambering on the peeled skeleton of a giant felled elm tree at the O'Brien Nature Play Area. (Come on the right evening and you'll hear a concert as well.)

You are enjoying the Brenton Arboretum near Dallas Center — quite possibly the most beautiful place in Iowa of which you've never heard. The land has been in the same family since 1853 — barely seven years after Iowa achieved statehood. Although it is only about 20 minutes from the western edge of the Des Moines metro, the nonprofit arboretum has escaped wide notice.

That's partly by design and partly due to the nature of the man whose vision brought it to life.

One Man's Mission

Look for a Prius parked along the side of the 2-mile gravel road that loops through the arboretum. You may see a guy nearby wearing a battered hat and old khakis wielding well-used Fiskars loppers on some suckering trees.

That would be J.C. "Buz" Brenton, the great-great grandson of Dr. James Brenton, who settled on land just a stone's throw away 160 years ago, after coming to Iowa from Indiana by covered wagon. Dr. Brenton, the first doctor in Iowa west of Des Moines, bought 80 acres in Dallas County at \$1.25 per acre.

Brenton didn't start out to create an arboretum — a place for the enjoyment, collection, and study of trees. He just wanted to preserve a natural area, where he could plant some trees, spend time with one of his beloved dogs, and refresh his soul. His wife, Sue, encouraged it.

"I started this for me," Brenton says. "I wanted a place where I could come out and enjoy these things,"

"I don't know of another arboretum like it."

— Anthony Tyznik, noted landscape architect

sweeping an arm as if to encompass all 2,100 trees and shrubs now planted on the property.

Brenton, a modest man with an outsize life, was a major player in the former Brenton Bank empire, the \$2 billion company that was sold to Wells Fargo in 2001. An avowed environmentalist and dedicated philanthropist, Brenton has raised funds for dozens of projects, including the Des Moines Civic Center and, most recently, the revamped Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden. He's responsible for the Heritage Carousel of Des Moines, located in Union Park, and the Brenton Skating Plaza in downtown Des Moines. At 79, he still swims daily (he swam the English Channel in 1989).

Almost daily he heads out to his arboretum, which opened in 1997. Brenton himself planted the first several hundred trees, including his favorite, the tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*).

The Lay of the Land

Brenton hired Anthony Tyznik, an Illinois landscape architect who designed the well-known Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois, to draw a master plan.

"I was impressed with the site," Tyznik says. "It had all this topography."

Relatively flat fields surround the property, but "All of a sudden you come into this place with a change in elevation, a little stream, and various exposures that gave a lot of diversity and interesting changes in aesthetics," Tyznik says. Working with the contours of the land, he created vistas both grand and small.



Strategically placed Adirondack chairs encourage visitors to pause and enjoy the views throughout the arboretum.

The plan is unique: Trees are planted in family groupings in a prairie setting instead of in a woodland. "I don't know of another arboretum like it," Tyznik says. "The prairie actually flows among the plants."

And trees aren't the only things growing — the arboretum is, too. More trees will be planted on an adjacent 20-acre piece of land donated to the arboretum, and the experience there will have an entirely different feel. "It's in a glen. Walking along the stream, you're lower and more protected, so it feels more intimate," says Lynn Kuhn, the arboretum's executive director.

"I decided I should open it up to the public," Brenton says. "I'm upset when there's hardly anyone here. But then I remember it's just for me."

If you build it...

Brenton is kidding, of course: With an executive director, a general manager, an outreach coordinator, a board of directors, and an army of volunteers, the arboretum attracts a growing number of groups and individual visitors each year, hosting field trips, birthday parties, and family gatherings and offering dozens of events annually from courses to concerts. (See "Brenton Bucket List," page 37, for an idea of what you can do there.) Still, it's a big place. Even when other visitors are present, it's hard not to feel like you have it mostly to yourself.

Many of the trees in the arboretum, not even 20 years old, are still on the small side, and the arboretum still seems far out in the country. But



PHOTO BY JOHN HOLTORF

Arboretum founder J.C. "Buz" Brenton planted the first few hundred trees himself and can still be seen on the grounds pruning trees and giving tours. He started the arboretum as a personal nature retreat, then opened it to the public.

there will come a day, Tyznik predicts, when city sprawl reaches right out to the Brenton Arboretum. "I wouldn't be too concerned about people not knowing about it," he says. "They will."

Some of the arboretum's biggest fans are even younger than the trees. Elizabeth Schultz's two sons, Andrew, 9, and Matthew, 6, love going to the arboretum to romp, roll downhill in the grasses, and explore.

"My youngest son has fallen in love with it," Schultz says. For their latest birthdays, she asked the boys where to host a party. Matthew replied,

"Mommy, of course we'd go to my favorite place in the world, the Brenton Arboretum!"

Many visitors may come to appreciate trees in the same way Buz Brenton does. He is writing a book about them.

"As I proceeded to learn more about each species, they became acquaintances, friends," Brenton writes. "There they were and I was often with them. Always silent but so alive! Often majestic and modest, but sometimes exuberant; always attached to place. I admired their character, their permanency."

Brenton Bucket List

YOU'LL FIND A LOT TO DO AT THE BRENTON ARBORETUM. IN ADDITION TO VIEWING THE TREES AND THE VISTAS, YOU CAN



PHOTO BY DEB WILEY

Create. Workshops vary; past classes have included dried-flower arranging, botanical block printing, watercolor painting, botanical drawing, journaling, and more.

Learn. You can take classes in tree identification and the art of choosing plants for landscaping projects or join a Founder's Walk led by Buz Brenton.

Listen. Seasonal outdoor concerts under the pavilion range from tango (dance lessons included!) to chamber music.

Play. At the O'Brien Nature Play Area, kids can climb on stumps and hay bales, walk through a tunnel of living plants, build bark structures, and check out the butterflies. It's one of Iowa's 16 Nature Explore Certified Classrooms designed to connect children with nature. Schedule a play date; the arboretum will supply tools and suggest nature activities.



PHOTO BY JOHN HOLTORF

Rent the facilities. Arboretum members can rent the outdoor pavilion with a living green roof and the new Vista Room in the environmentally friendly administrative building; several seasonal children's birthday party packages combine outdoor activities with use of the arboretum's facilities.

Volunteer. As a naturalist, librarian, event staff member, tour guide, host, research assistant, trail keeper, or gardener, you'll enjoy the arboretum while sharing it with others.



PHOTO BY DEB WILEY

Walk trails. Four miles of trails include six paths that wind through tree and shrub collections, reconstructed prairies, ponds, and streams. The popular Leaf Walk trail has its own brochure with a key to identifying trees by their leaves (no cheating by looking at the tags at the base of each tree grouping!).

Watch birds. About 184 species have been seen here; a brochure lets you check off the ones you glimpse during your visit.



PHOTO BY OHN HOTLORF

Left: The arboretum is particularly attractive in the fall, when evergreens contrast with golden grasses and flamboyant hardwoods.

Right: Children are among the arboretum's greatest enthusiasts, whether they're visiting as part of a school field trip, with their families, or for a class.

Planting? Consider One of These Top Trees

Andy Schmitz, director of horticulture and general manager of the Brenton Arboretum, loves trees. He hangs out with 2,100 of them every week at the arboretum and sometimes vacations by taking seed-hunting expeditions in other parts of the country to seek out species. Schmitz, a Waterloo native and Iowa State University graduate, recommends these five tall trees for our state:

Kentucky coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioica*)

Schmitz likes Kentucky coffeetrees for their ornamental seedpods and because they are relatively rare in Iowa. Mature trees reach 60 to 75 feet with a 40- to 50-foot spread. Tolerant of urban conditions, limestone soils, and dry or moist soils, Kentucky coffeetrees provide light shade, have no disease or insect issues, and lend a soft texture to the landscape in summer and a coarse texture in winter.

Common bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*)

This deciduous conifer sports wonderful red-brown color in the fall, then drops its soft needles. The knobby "cypress knees" add an interesting look to a landscape. The bald cypress is native to the swamps of the southeastern United States but tolerates dry soils. It grows 50 to 70 feet tall and 30 to 40 feet wide.

Bitternut hickory (*Carya cordiformis*)

A faster-growing hickory with sulfur-yellow leaf buds, the bitternut hickory has the best fall leaf color, a clean bright yellow. It grows 60 to 75 feet tall and 40 to 50 feet wide.

Research and Collections

One of the purposes of arboreta is to collect and study trees. The arboretum has collected about 90 native species of Kentucky coffeetrees (*Gymnocladus dioica*) and is gathering information on cold hardiness, growth habits and rates, and more. Eventually the arboretum expects to be certified as a nationally recognized collection by the North American Plant Collection Consortium through the American Public Gardens Association.

Arboreta are also important to preserving trees. As insects such as the emerald ash borer and elm bark beetle decimate entire tree species, it's important to know which trees survive and why. The work being done at the Brenton Arboretum may not be widely valued — yet.

The arboretum also has the second-largest collection of disease-resistant elm trees — 38 species, hybrids, and cultivars — in the country. The largest is at the Morton Arboretum.



PHOTO BY DEB WILEY

Accolade elm (*Ulmus japonica* × *wilsoniana* 'Morton')

Your elm-growing days are not over. New disease- and insect-resistant strains of elms include the Accolade elm, developed at the Morton Arboretum in Illinois. It has the classic American elm vase shape. It is drought-tolerant and offers excellent disease and insect resistance. Bonuses: deep green glossy foliage and a fast growth rate. It grows 60 to 70 feet tall and 50 to 60 feet wide.

Chinkapin oak (*Quercus muehlenbergii*)

It's clear Schmitz likes big trees, and the chinkapin oak is no exception. It reaches 50 to 60 feet tall with an even wider spread of 60 to 70 feet. It grows in limestone soils that are common in many parts of Iowa but prefers deep, rich bottomland soils. ■■

When You Go

The Brenton Arboretum
25141 260th Street
Dallas Center 50063
515-992-4211

thebrentonarboretum.org is an extensive website with a calendar of classes and other activities.
Open Tuesday through Sunday 9 a.m. to sunset.
Closed Mondays.

Free admission (including school field trips); fees for classes, workshops, facility rentals, and organized activities. Discounts for members.

Directions: The arboretum is 2 miles southwest of Dallas Center. From I-35/80, take the Hickman Road/US Highway 6 exit. Go 9.5 miles west. Turn north on R Avenue/County Road 15 for 3 miles. Go west 1.5 miles on 260th Street (gravel).