

Virtual gardens ever green

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While nothing compares to the sights and scents of a real garden, a virtual garden offers some unique features of its own-to appreciate its beauty, you need not leave home. The sun is always shining on the Rhode Island Agricultural Experiment Station's (RIAES) Virtual Gardens, and each flower is in bloom 365 days a year.

The Virtual Gardens use QuickTime technology to bring you inside the gardens, where you can take a self-directed tour through 360-degree images using a computer mouse and keyboard. The gardens are presented in seven "nodes" that correspond to the physical gardens at URI's Kingston campus. Clicking on Node 1 brings you to the water garden. Using your mouse, you can pan from left to right and up and down, until you see a plant you are interested in. You might alight on the Hardy Water Lily. For a closer look, you click the shift key to zoom in. Clicking on the image with your mouse, you pull up a description of the species, its scientific name and family, hardiness, the diseases and insects it is prey to (in this case, none), and landscape value. Clicking the icon for the sound file under the right hand image activates an audio description of the plant. Using the Ctrl key to zoom out, you may continue on your tour.

In 1999 Apple Computer called Virtual Gardens "one of the country's most innovative learning sites," and the site remains in the Apple QuickTime Showcase on the Apple.Com Web site at www.apple.com/quicktime/education/. Currently, the Virtual Gardens host 5,000 visitors per month, and RIAES Webmaster John Peterson is sure they are not all coming for the site's educational aspects, but to check out a neat interactive site. Still, he feels everyone can learn something without realizing it, as "the excitement of discovery just takes over."

RIEAS hopes the Virtual Gardens will inspire visitors to tour the actual URI Learning Landscape on the URI Kingston campus, which features evergreen plantings, perennial and annual flowering beds, and a water garden. Species chosen for this garden require minimal use of pesticides, water, fertilizers, and maintenance.

The Virtual Gardens and the URI Learning Landscape are sponsored by the R.I. Nursery and Landscape Association. Visit the Virtual Gardens at www.riaes.org/explore/garden.html.