

MICHIGAN | BLOSSOM TRAIL

Full Bloom

In Southwest Michigan,
springtime belongs to flowers

Fernwood Botanical Garden
and Nature Preserve

JOSHUA NOWICKI

By Matt Alderton

F ALL IN SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN is magical. After a humid summer, the muggy air turns cool and crisp; the bugs have stopped biting, and Lake Michigan sparkles a special shade of blue. And best of all: Trees envelop the landscape in autumnal canopies of fire-colored foliage.

But fall is about endings. Because it represents renewal, spring in Southwest

Michigan is even more beatific. The air is just as crisp; the lake is no less cerulean, and the only thing more pleasing than the colors — which shine that much brighter against the grayscale memory of winter — are the springtime scents that accompany them.

“Our fall color tours are beautiful, but for a rare treat, come in the spring,” advises Millicent Huminsky, executive director of the Southwestern Michigan Tourist Council. “Nothing will lift your spirits higher than driving past all our

flowering trees and breathing in the sweetest-scented air you’ll find anywhere on Earth.”

Springtime blossom tours in Southwest Michigan date back to 1906, when the Rev. W.J. Cady of the former First Congregational Church in Benton Harbor encouraged his congregation to drive through local orchards to view the blossoms, which he called “symbols of a renewed life.”

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More than a century later, spring blossoms are the focal point of one of Michigan's oldest celebrations, the annual **Blossomtime Festival** (blossomtimefestival.org). The weeklong affair in Benton Harbor and St. Joseph typically concludes with the Grand Floral Parade, which features colorful floats, local bands, regional celebrities and throngs of spectators who line the streets to celebrate spring.

More than festivals, however, blossom time is about florescence, which is best appreciated walking through Southwest Michigan's multitudinous orchards — just like Cady's congregation did 114 years ago. A favorite destination is **Jollay Orchards** (jollayorchards.com) in Coloma, where seventh-generation farmer Jay Jollay grows cherries, apples and peaches on land his family has been tending since 1857.

"The farm in springtime is great because it's a reawakening of all the orchards after a long winter," says Jollay, who encourages visitors to bring a picnic lunch and spend an hour or two walking the fruit orchards, which typically bloom from late April until early May.

Native wildflowers also consume Southwest Michigan in spring, and an ideal way to see them is on a stroll or hike through **Fernwood Botanical Garden and Nature Preserve** (fernwoodbotanical.org) in Niles. Encompassing 105 acres of cultivated and natural areas along the St. Joseph River, it includes a 40-acre arboretum, 8 acres of gardens and a 55-acre nature preserve with 2.5 miles of trails.

"Visitors particularly enjoy the ... masses of colorful bulbs and native wildflowers that blanket Fernwood's gardens and woodlands," says Fernwood Director of Development and External Relations Elaine Rowland. The fuchsia bloom of native flowering redbud trees dominates Fernwood's woodland edges and borders throughout the adjacent St. Joseph River Valley. In fact, the nearby town of Buchanan is known as "The Redbud City."

Another botanical hotbed is **Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park** (meijergardens.org) in Grand Rapids. Its 158-acre main campus encompasses five indoor theme gardens, outdoor gardens, nature trails and a permanent collection of nearly 300 sculptures that cohabitate with its prolific plant life. Along with an 8-acre Japanese garden that's beloved for its cherry blossoms, the season's highlight is *Fred and Dorothy Fichter Butterflies Are Blooming*, an annual exhibition that takes place in March and



Jollay Orchards



Tulips and DeZwaan windmill, Holland

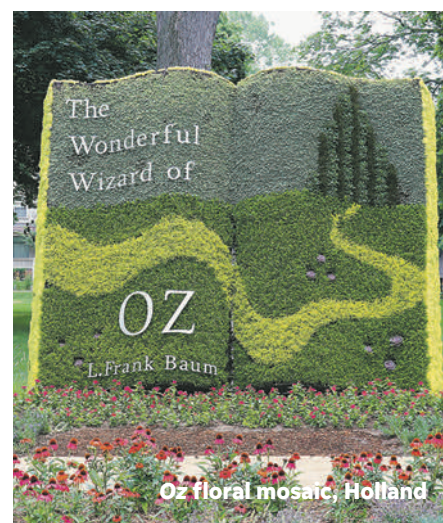
April, when more than 7,000 tropical butterflies fly free in the park's five-story, 15,000-square-foot Lena Meijer Tropical Conservatory.

Wherever your spring blossom tour takes you, it's difficult to imagine a better finale than Holland. Best known for its 259-year-old windmill — the only authentic, working Dutch windmill in the United States — the Dutch enclave is paved in a colorful patchwork of more than 5 million tulips each spring. To celebrate, Holland hosts its annual **Tulip Time Festival** (tuliptime.com), a weeklong event that began in 1929 and commences on the first Saturday in May.

"The town is an explosion of color each spring," says Sally Laukitis, executive director of the Holland Area Visitors Bureau. "It's beautiful."

If you miss the tulips, which only bloom for approximately three weeks, Holland is still full of flower power: Not only does the town replace its tulips with annuals after they bloom, but it also boasts another blossoming attraction — a 120-square-foot floral mosaic sculpture that pays homage to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Introduced last year, the sculpture of bedding plants depicts an "open book" cover of the classic novel, whose author, L. Frank Baum, is believed to have written parts of the book during summer vacations near Holland. The city's tribute also includes a yellow brick road featuring bronze sculptures of famous Oz characters based on illustrations from the book. Literally and figuratively, it's a storybook ending to a blooming fun tour of Southwest Michigan.



Oz floral mosaic, Holland



Fernwood Botanical Garden and Nature Preserve

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