

WORTH THE TRIP

Sunken Gardens: where breathtaking beauty thrives in a sinkhole

BY PATRICIA HORWELL

Town Chronicle Correspondent

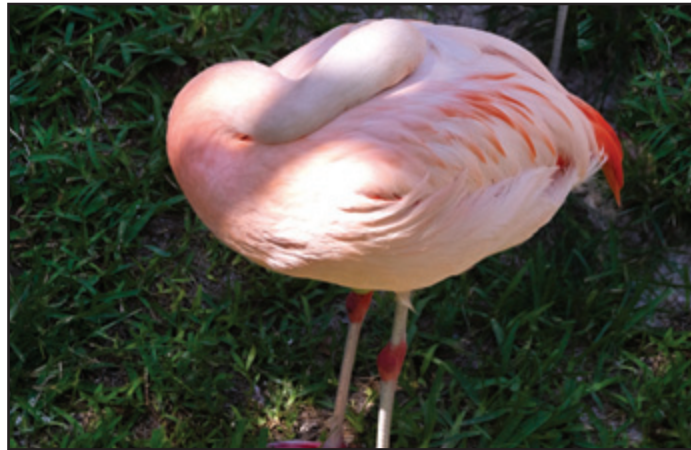
Sinkholes. Florida has many. Caused by porous underground rock like limestone, which is water soluble and eventually dissolves, sinkholes have been known to swallow homes and cars.

But one sinkhole in St. Petersburg — Sunken Gardens — is a serene oasis, filled with abundant plant life, bees, butterflies and birds. It also lays claim to being one of the first and last remaining original roadside attractions in Florida.

Just an hour-and-a-half north of Wellen Park, Sunken Gardens' verdant landscape offers visitors a quiet, wistful experience where the only sounds are the cries of birds — several macaws, parrots, a cockatoo and a flock of Chilean flamingos are residents there. On a recent visit, birdsong from visiting feathered friends filled the air. Butterflies are plentiful in the area planted just for them and bees have built a hive in the bee garden. Signage warns visitors of the active hive.

Sunken Gardens is the perfect spot for a picnic lunch. Visitors are encouraged to bring food and drinks (no alcohol) onto the property. It is a great place to sit with your favorite book, walk hand in hand with a loved one, entertain the kids (they especially seem to love the macaws and flamingos) or simply commune with nature.

There is plenty of parking, and benches are located throughout the property. For the most part, Sunken Gardens is ADA



PATRICIA HORWELL / TOWN CHRONICLE

TOP LEFT: A flamingo preening its feathers. TOP RIGHT: Pops of color are everywhere.

compliant. Because of its historic nature, there are a few paths that are more difficult to navigate, but alternative pathways are provided. Although wheelchairs and walkers are welcome, there are none available on the site. The gift shop features a variety of nature-themed T-shirts, stuffed animals, toys, hats and more.

The gardens' story began more than 100 years ago, in 1911, when George Turner, a plumber, avid gardener and real estate prospector, plunked down \$600 and bought 4.1 acres in St. Pete. In 1926, he had a building constructed on the property. It became known as the Sanitary Public Market and is now home to the Great Explorations Children's Museum, which is next door to the

gardens.

By the 1930s, Turner had drained a sinkhole on the property. That process left behind a rich, mucky soil that was perfect for gardening — his favorite hobby. When neighbors began asking to stroll through his garden, Turner decided it was time to give tours. He charged 15 cents for admission.

By the 1940s, the Turners erected their first official entrance and gift shop, which now houses the gardens' History Center. Sunken Gardens became a popular place for weddings, teas, garden club gatherings and other social events — and it still is. The first flock of flamingos was added in 1955.

Hard times hit in the '80s when Orlando was developed as a tourist location, putting



A flamingo forages for its meal.

many Florida roadside attractions out of business. Turner's grandsons decided it was time to sell.

The community took up the mantle in the 1990s, working to preserve the gardens. By 1998, Sunken Gardens was designated as a protected local historic landmark. In 1999, the historic main entrance was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The attraction is now owned by the city of St. Petersburg. 📍



Lush surroundings greet visitors at every turn.



Tree canopies grace many pathways.

Sunken Gardens

- **Where:** 1825 4th St. N., St. Petersburg
- **When:** Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m., Sunday, noon-4:30 p.m. (Last admission sold at 4 p.m.). Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.
- **Admission:** Adults, \$15; seniors (62+), \$12; children (2-12), \$6; under 2, free
- **Contact:** 727-551-3102; sunken-gardens.org

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