

SHAKE WINTER IN ONE OF
THESE SPRINGTIME FAVORITES

BY PENNY MUSCO

FROM
gray to green

Texas Bluebonnets
blanket the fields around
Burnet in the spring.

“For lo, the winter is past,” King Solomon proclaimed as he beckoned his bride outside on what must have been a beautiful spring day. “Flowers appear on the earth [and] the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.”

Few things are more delightful than drinking in the sights and smells of bright buds after a dreary winter. Even better is the vision and aroma of masses of them. Fortunately, there are destinations across the country that showcase assortments of springtime blooms in places that also offer a host of other activities in which groups can revel during the season.

Azaleas

WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA

Azaleas, the classic Southern shrubs are “all over town,” said Connie Nelson of the Wilmington and Beaches Convention and Visitors Bureau in North Carolina, and particularly at Greenfield Lake Park and Airlie Gardens. The Azalea Festival, April 1-5, not only pays homage to them but also celebrates the area’s overall natural beauty.

In this “River to Sea” community, “everything is easy to get to,” Nelson said, including three island beaches and the Historic District’s shops and restaurants. She recommends trolley, horse-drawn carriage or walking excursions on land, and Cape Fear Riverboats’ Henrietta by water. Other must-sees are historic homes from the antebellum, Colonial and Victorian eras, and the World War II battleship North Carolina.

Another plant to check out is the native Venus flytrap, found at Carolina Beach State Park and the Stanley Rehder Carnivorous Plant Garden.

WILMINGTONANDBEACHES.COM

Bluebonnets

BURNET, TEXAS

Texas’ state flower puts on a stunning spring display in Burnet, earning the town the official title of Bluebonnet Capital of Texas. While many have been planted along the Lone Star State’s highways, they’re local only to this Highland Lakes region between Austin and San Antonio.

The seas of blue are at their prime during April — Burnet’s Bluebonnet Festival is April 10-12. Groups can customize lodging packages at the Canyon of the Eagles on Lake Buchanan, a place to “disconnect to reconnect with nature,” said Gary Griggs, vice president of sales and marketing. The resort presents a range of activities to do just that: kayak rentals, canyon cruises and stargazing at the Eagle Eye Observatory.

A local wine trail incorporates several wineries offering tastings and tours.

LAKESANDHILLS.COM

Cherry Blossoms

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

Newark, New Jersey’s Branch Brook Park features a diverse collection of nearly 5,000 flowering cherry trees, and their delicate white and pink petals begin to appear in early April. Bus tours through the Frederick Law Olmsted-designed park occur on weekdays during its Cherry Blossom Festival, April 4-19, and guides are available to board private tour buses, said Kathy Kahl of the Essex County Division of Cultural and Historic Affairs.

Overlooking Branch Brook Lake is the Gothic-style Cathedral Basilica, which hosts complimentary concerts and tours on Wednesdays at noon. Other cultural venues include the New Jersey Performing Arts Center and the Prudential Center, with its new interactive Grammy Museum Experience.

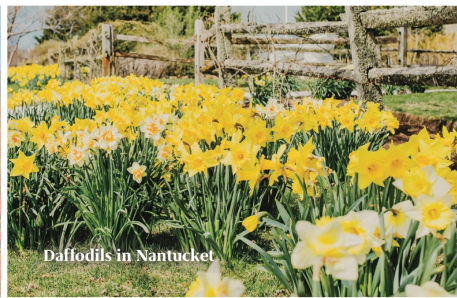
COURTESY BURNET COC



Portland's International Rose Test Garden



California poppies



Daffodils in Nantucket

BY WILLIAM DESOUSA-MAUK, COURTESY NANTUCKET COC

Have You Met Newark Tours escort visitors to the city's historic and modern-day hot spots, as well as on a foodie exploration of the Ironbound, known for its Portuguese, Spanish and Brazilian cuisine.

NEWARKHAPPENING.COM

Daffodils

NANTUCKET, MASSACHUSETTS

Perhaps no flower represents springtime awakening like a daffodil's cheerful face. Nantucket emerges from its winter nap with a riot of "about 3 [million] to 4 million" of them, said William DeSousa-Mauk of the Chamber of Commerce. They're set along the island's miles of pathways and roads, bursting forth around the last week in April.

During the Daffodil Festival, April 24-26, Nantucket also sports many "human daffodils," DeSousa-Mauk said, as residents and vacationers alike deck themselves in floral splendor. Themed tours — maritime, historic and birdwatching, among them — by car, bike, boat or on foot show them off in all their glory.

The Cultural District is the setting for theater, galleries, museums and restaurants. Cisco Brewers boasts a winery, a brewery and a distillery and is open for tours and tastings daily April through November, and Thursday through Sunday November through April.

NANTUCKET-MA.GOV

Lilacs

MACKINAC ISLAND, MICHIGAN

While lilacs aren't original to Mackinac Island — they were likely brought from New England — these fragrant flowers thrive here because of favorable growing conditions. Horticulturist Jeff Young said, "There's nowhere you can go on the island where you're not going to see them," especially during the Lilac Festival, June 5-14.

Mackinac's old-fashioned, laid-back atmosphere is because of the lack of cars — visitors arrive via ferries from either the Lower or Upper peninsulas. Transportation around the compact island is by foot, bike, scooter, taxi or, more delightfully, horse-drawn carriage. Cruises through the Straits of Mackinac operate May through October, gliding past handsome Victorian and turn-of-the-20th-century homes.

Mackinac has over 1,000 rooms, but the charming

Grand Hotel is perhaps the best known of its lodgings, welcoming groups with a choice of meal plans, plus afternoon tea, lawn games and dazzling views from its expansive rocking chair porch.

MACKINACISLAND.ORG

Poppies

LANCASTER, CALIFORNIA

Every spring, a corner of the Mojave Desert — an hour north of L.A. — comes alive with California's state flower at the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve. The riot of colors appears as early as late February and often lasts through late May — the Poppy Festival is April 17-19.

Some years bring a "superbloom," said Sandy Smith, executive director of Destination Lancaster CA. While the exact timing can't be predicted, when it does happen, she said, "it's totally unreal." Group tours can be arranged on weekdays along the undulating hills' eight miles of trails.

The vicinity is also known for its aerospace history. Nearby Edwards Air Force Base conducts free tours, which include the Air Force Flight Test Museum, Tuesday through Friday with advance reservations. In Palmdale, Joe Davies Heritage Airpark exhibits over 20 military and NASA aircraft.

DESTINATIONLANCASTERCA.ORG

Roses

PORTLAND, OREGON

The City of Roses acquired its nickname in the early 1900s when cuttings brought from Europe caused citizens to "just go crazy and start planting them everywhere," said Carol Ross of the Portland Rose Festival Foundation, which organizes a large international event that will take place this year May 22 to June 7.

The roses heritage is on display across the city and en masse at three locations. The Portland

International Rose Test Garden in Washington Park has an array of over 10,000 roses in 610 varieties, unfolding from late May through October. Guided group tours are organized between Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends. Peninsula Park maintains 5,000 shrubs; Ladd Circle Park and Rose Garden, 3,000 in 60 strains. Also in Washington Park are the Hoyt Arboretum and the Portland Japanese Garden, the perfect spot from which to glimpse Mount Hood.

Want more flowers? Lan Su Chinese Garden harmoniously combines art, design and nature, and the Crystal Springs Rhododendron Gardens' 2,500 spring bushes peak in late April/early May.

TRAVELPORTLAND.COM

Tulips

SKAGIT VALLEY, WASHINGTON

Bounded by Puget Sound, the Cascade Mountains, Seattle, and Vancouver, British Columbia, Washington's Skagit Valley boasts over 1 million tulips thanks to a climate akin to a more famous tulip producer: Holland. The Tulip Festival runs annually April 1-30 and is planned as a driving tour because "there isn't one specific address to go to," said Cindy Verge, the festival's executive director.

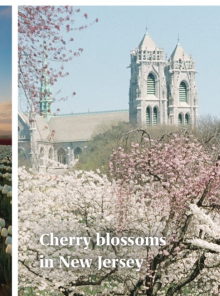
Fields include 360 acres primarily set between La Conner and Mount Vernon, as well as the show gardens at Tulip Town and RoozenGaarde. Groups can trade flowers for flours at the King Arthur Flour Baking School at the Bread Lab in Burlington. Hands-on classes are scheduled for everyone from home bakers to professionals.

A different set of skills is called for at the Swinomish Casino and Lodge in Anacortes. Out on the water, excursions weave among the San Juan Islands to spot orcas and other wildlife.

VISITSKAGITVALLEY.COM



BY ANTHONY KUEMPE, COURTESY SKAGIT VALLEY TULIP FESTIVAL



COURTESY ESSEX COUNTY PARKS & REC

