

History of Holden Arboretum

Created in 1931 with a bequest from Albert Fairchild Holden, the Holden Arboretum encompasses 3,500 acres in Lake and Geauga counties.

The Arboretum was created by Albert Fairchild Holden as a memorial for his daughter, Elizabeth, who died in 1908 at the age of 12. The president of the Island Creek Coal Co. and managing director of the American Zinc, Lead, and Smelting Co., Holden was familiar with the Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University and originally intended to leave his estate to that institution. However, his sister, Roberta Holden Bole convinced him that the people of Northeast Ohio deserved an arboretum. When Holden died in 1913 at the age of 46, funds from his estate were placed in a trust for the development of an arboretum after a life interest for his two teenage daughters, Emery May and Katharine Davis. Originally, the Arboretum was to have been located on the family estate in Bratenahl, but family interests precluded its use. An alternate site at the Lake View Cemetery was also considered, but later abandoned.

An extensive survey of the region was conducted before Lake County was chosen as the home for the new arboretum. Roberta Holden Bole again showed her support for the project, donating 100 acres in Lake County, which forms the core of Holden today. During its early years, the Cleveland Museum of Natural History oversaw Holden, creating a firm foundation in the sciences. In 1952, the courts permitted Holden's separation from the museum and its incorporation as a not-for-profit organization.

Nurtured in its early years by the Bole family, the Arboretum also gained the support of investor Warren H. Corning, who built his home Lantern Court on Kirtland-Chardon Road near the fledgling Arboretum. By 1956, his support, as well as his success in gaining the support of other area landowners, helped increase the size of the Arboretum to 1,000 acres. The largest land purchase during that period was the Baldwin farm, a 556-acre parcel that is now home to some of the Arboretum's natural areas, its nut bearing tree collections, and its specimen collection. Corning served as the first unpaid "executive administrator" and would serve in that capacity until 1958.

In 1958, R. Henry Norweb, Jr., Albert Holden's grandson, succeeded Corning as the Arboretum's first paid director and would lead the organization until his retirement in 1983. Under his direction, land continued to be acquired, facilities and features aimed at attracting and serving the public were added, collections grew and long-term planning began in earnest for the day when the Holden Trust would be available.

In 2014, the Holden Arboretum integrated with Cleveland Botanical Garden, an ever-changing 10-acre urban escape located in the University Circle neighborhood of Cleveland, to create Holden Forests & Gardens, which is the 13th largest public garden in the country. The integrated organization is working together to build a greener, healthier Northeast Ohio.

Today, Holden Forests & Gardens is supported by funds from The Holden Trust as well as the contributions of members, donors and business partners.