

# A MOUNTAIN OF A TASK

**John Van Etten's job is to keep the grounds beautiful at Mohonk Mountain Resort, but the deer don't care**

BY JAMES E. GUYETTE/ CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

**G**rounds Superintendent John Van Etten oversees multiple tasks at Mohonk Mountain Resort high above the Hudson River Valley, about 90 minutes from New York City.

In addition to overseeing design and horticultural maintenance, along with nursery and greenhouse production, he supervises a busy

◀ Left, the 130-year-old Mohonk Mountain Resort is located in the Hudson River Valley, about a 90 minute drive north of New York City.

▶ Right, John Van Etten uses organic gardening to create beauty.

▼ Below, the Show Garden is planted in one day, about 23,000 seedlings.

retail operation, presents educational programs and dispenses advice worldwide as an expert on deer-resistant plant material. He accomplishes all of this while also executing an ever-evolving integrated pest management program at the resort's grounds.

"I'm responsible for 500 acres, and it's managed closely with IPM," says Van Etten, who graduated from Ulster College in New York with a degree in horticulture. "We uphold strong environmental ideals. Our core garden area — which encompasses 15 acres with over 60,000 plants — is entirely organic, and, in our Show Garden, we show people that you can successfully garden organically."

The resort's formal flower garden is over three acres. It's a showcase of heirloom roses, perennials, rustic vine-covered arbors as well as formal cutting gardens. The grounds also include two aquatic gardens, and herb, rock and Alpine gardens. Van Etten's crew also mows 65 acres of turf on the resort's century-old, nine-hole golf course (Scottish design), plus maintaining a 20,000-sq.-ft. bentgrass putting green and regulation lawn bowling and croquet courts.

Situated on top of a small mountain, the resort presents a mowing challenge for Van Etten's crew members, which varies from eight to 25 seasonally. They have to carry a small mower up to some sites. "We have access to some of our terraced gardens and sunken gardens only by steps and bridges. And that's all on foot," says Van Etten.

His crew uses eight Toro rotary and reel mowers and a John Deere aerator to maintain the grounds. They must work around activities at the resort. "We look at our tournament schedules and try to fill in the blanks.

We're always aerating our lawns, and we topdress them with compost that we make on site," he adds.

The 130-year-old Mohonk Mountain Resort has been designated as a National Historic Landmark.

The Mountain House itself is a turreted, seven-story Victorian castle. It was built between 1879 and 1910 and has 261 guest rooms, many with fireplaces and balconies and all graced with fresh flowers grown by Van Etten and his staff. The property also has 128 summer houses constructed from turn-of-the-century chestnut and native red cedar. The summer houses are rustic but comfortable. No two of the gazebo-like structures are the same.



Van Etten started as a grounds foreman with Mohonk 14 years ago. He says he's acquired much of his understanding of organic gardening and IPM by his day-to-day work on the grounds.

And, he gets plenty of opportunity to practice what he preaches. The one-day planting of the three-acre Show Garden is another annual tradition at the resort. Last June 1, he and his crew planted 23,000 seedlings representing 200 different flower varieties. Over the next three days, the 16 workers also put out another 37,000 seedlings in other beds and borders.

The plants were sprayed with Deer-Away repellent to prevent the deer from eating them. "Our largest problem so far is our native deer population," says Van Etten. Not surprisingly, he's researched and experimented with ways to keep them from destroying the resort's stunning beds and grounds. The four-page list of plant material that the deer don't like helps him create landscapes that resist damage. Requests from other homeowners and grounds managers has kept Van Etten busy answering requests. "Everybody, it seems, has deer problems," he says. To date, he's sent out over 30,000 copies of his list.

"They (the deer) least prefer plants that have gray foliage," he says. "This has to do with the chemical compounds that make up the coloring and pigmentation of the plants."

But deer don't occupy all of his thoughts. His latest project is a Victorian maze that he designed and installed last summer. With 268 eight-foot-tall arbor vitae, the maze covers 7,500 sq. ft. and provides a healthy challenge for resort guests. **LM**