

HIGHLAND PARK NEWS



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Photo by Joel Lerner • Pioneer Press

Gape at gorgeous garden Sunday

By **KENNETH L. R. PATCHEN**
Staff Writer

When five 53-foot trailer trucks backed into the cul-de-sac to deliver trees for Brent J. Markus five summers ago, he was between his junior and senior years at Highland Park High School.

The shipment of balled and burlapped conifers and assorted other trees was the largest he had ever bought from nurseries in Oregon and Washington.

"For two months or so," he said, "you couldn't even see the driveway. Birds were coming in from everywhere. The birds were loving it."

The birds probably had never seen anything like it: rare tree species galore. Markus bought most of the trees for other homeowners, and kept a few for planting at his parent's home.

Markus is now a senior student in the Landscape Architecture program at Cornell University, but Sunday he also is host for an open house from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at his home, as part of The Garden Conservancy's Open Days Program. His more than 300 conifers and Japanese maples, some considered rare, will be on display.

The Open Days Program features about 400 private gardens in 22 states, several of which are in the Chicago area, including Highland Park and



Joel Lerner/Pioneer Press

Brent Markus, 484 Hillside Drive, Highland Park, will open his garden to the public on Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., as part of the National Gardening Conservancy's Open Days program.

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Lake Forest. Reservations are not required, and admission is a \$5 contribution to the Garden Conservancy.

"This garden is one of the few in the Open Days program that focuses on conifers," said Deborah H. Friedman, of the New York State based Garden Conservancy. "It's very special."

"It's lovely," said Melissa Shennan, a volunteer with the Conservancy who recommends gardens for the program. "Every single tree and shrub is special."

Reflecting on his large purchase, Markus said he did not know his tree order would bury his parent's driveway.

"Back then, I did not know as much about business," he said.

His father, Dr. Norman J. Markus, who had accompanied his son on some of the West Coast buying trips to assemble the order, had no problem with the loss of his driveway for a few months.

"Fortunately," he said, "our neighbors are very tolerant people."

Brent Markus started vegetable gardening with his

mother, Donalee Markus, at a very young age. When 12 years old, he started working with bonsai, the Japanese art of growing mature trees in small containers. He started adding trees to the family garden when he was 14, an activity that had him ordering rare trees from all over the United States. Over the years, he has planted between 300 and 400 trees, many of them conifers, a cone-bearing evergreen such as pine or spruce trees.

"I've got about 40 different varieties of Japanese maples," he said.

He estimates about 90 percent of his trees have a label on them.

"I don't know anybody else in the Chicago area who has imported trees of such significant types," he said.

Sunday's visitors will find that the trees, which grow right up to the front property line, include five deciduous conifers - a species with a reputation for keeping its needles. Markus selects trees not only for their foliage, but also for their structure: the trunks, limbs, bark and branches. Even the sounds of wind and smells of evergreen are part of the experience.

The Markus garden is not the only stop on the tour.

Altogether, four gardens in Highland Park, Kenilworth and Winnetka are open to the public June 22, and five more are available July 27 in Highland Park, Lake Forest and Mettawa. A guide with discount coupon, garden descriptions and travel directions is available from The Garden Conservancy at (888) 842-2442.

The Conservancy was formed in 1989 to preserve exceptional American gardens, said Friedman. She said people who spend a lifetime creating a garden find, when they become older, they can no longer maintain it.

"These gorgeous gardens were just fading away," Friedman said. "Some of these private gardens are really, really fabulous."

"A garden is an ephemeral thing," Shennan added. "In one season it can be gone. Just as we preserve houses, there are landscapes to protect."

The Conservancy organizes groups to help nurture, care for and protect gardens as a public resource. The Open Days program is designed to build public appreciation for the variety and quality of gardens.

"What a great opportunity to learn," Shennan said.

More information is available at www.gardenconservancy.org.