



IWGS 2026 Symposium group photo by Robert Ramik.

Event Report

My First Time Attending the IWGS Symposium

By Madison Shankin

A trip to write home about! I flew to St. Louis from Asheville, North Carolina, where I work as the horticulturist for the Italian Gardens at Biltmore Estate, to attend the annual IWGS Symposium. I've held this position for less than a year, and before this, I came from a career largely in landscape, retail, and agriculture. I'm very "green," so they say, and I had been looking forward to this trip for weeks. I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but I knew it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up!

First, I'd like to thank the magnificent and magnetic Susan Davis for encouraging me to be "brazen." Unbeknownst to her, I needed no encouragement to spend the first afternoon accosting various IWGS members and trying to remember as many names as humanly possible. Susan challenged me to introduce myself to five new people that evening, and I met her goal and then some. Luckily for me, every single person in this lovely organization is completely friendly, welcoming, and smart as a whip.

In the following few days, I occupied myself with benefitting from this friendliness. Each person I met was a new companion. Every bus ride, walk through a

garden, and meal time was filled with informative and pleasant conversation. During each education session, members listened attentively and occupied question time with thoughtful inquiries. It's rare that I find myself truly intimidated, but this group of people knows their stuff and has the years of experience to back what they say up. I'll admit to being a little nervous from the start, as brazen as I may be.

Usually in a group of such experienced smarties, I would expect to find myself perhaps the odd-person-out. I am extremely new to the wonderful world of water gardening, and I was expecting a certain degree of condescension, or at least impatience. That could



Deb Spencer, Susan Davis, Rolf Nelson, and Anita Nelson at the Missouri Botanical Garden. Photo by Jeannie Suffern.



Supper poolside at the Nature's Recreation site in Arnold, Missouri.
Photo by Laura Grant.

not have been farther further from reality. Each person I spoke to with seemed to find my inexperience refreshing! The 2026 IWGS symposium was an excellent and hospitable environment for me to absorb as much information as I possibly could. Professionally, I enjoyed a plethora of networking opportunities and learning moments; personally, I had a blast doing fun stuff with cool people!

The events and outings themselves were fantastic. Besides the numerous beautiful water gardens we visited in St. Louis, we were also lucky enough to visit an aquarium. Another favorite moment of mine was the education session at the Missouri Botanical Gardens, especially the conversation about *Nepenthes* with Domonick Gravine. I really enjoyed his personal stories of travel and adventure, as well as his contagious enthusiasm for tropical pitcher plants. Besides the educational opportunities, I (obviously) loved every second I got to spend in each beautiful garden space we visited. The amount of thought and effort that goes into creating and maintaining these things is certainly not lost on me.

On the flight home, I worked to organize my notes and my thoughts, and as I looked forward to sharing what I had learned with my peers. I feel lucky to have had the privilege of such a pleasurable and informationally rich business trip, and I would jump at the chance to attend another. Thanks so much to all the wonderful people who answered my silly questions and chatted with me over breakfast, and thanks to all the hard-working folk who organized and executed this shindig. You haven't seen the last of me yet!

About the Author

Madison Shankin is with Biltmore in Asheville, NC.



Suzanne Boom and Joe Summers at the awards ceremony. Photo by Zijun Li.



Zijun Li's presentation. Photo by Jeannie Suffern.



Rob Sheldon and Susan Davis looked at *Nepenthes*. Photo by Jeannie Suffern.