



Simsbury's Heart Beats Here

Photo / Jerry Lintner

Purple verbena and sweet potato vine.

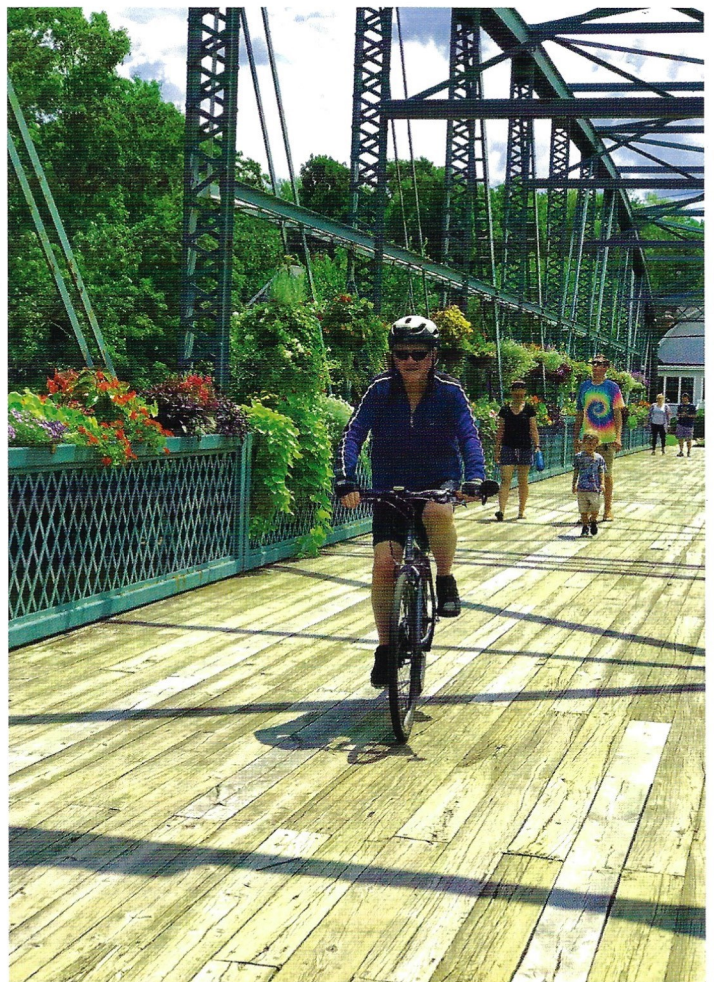


Photo / Faith Tyldsley

The Flower Bridge is popular with walkers and hikers.

Meet Me At The Bridge in Simsbury

By Faith Tyldsley

HERE COME the hikers, cyclists, photographers, artists and birdwatchers. Mothers sit and visit, children explore, families picnic, businesspeople meet clients, senior citizens mingle. Dogs step out with their humans. Yoga and Tai Chi classes flow. The community green space at the Old Drake Hill Flower Bridge and adjacent Hop Brook Landing Park is a great meeting spot.

Last year, 2021, marked a quarter century since the old iron bridge in Simsbury was transformed to become the Flower Bridge we enjoy today.

On the Bridge: Memories, Color & Wildlife

A succession of 72 flower boxes and 32 hanging baskets bloom along the bridge in colors as varied as royal purple and lime green. An additional 14

column baskets adorn Hop Brook Landing Park, and a cottage garden thrives at the east end of the bridge. River breezes and vibrant blooms engage in a swaying dance. Each container includes an engraved plaque, nestled within the foliage. Plaques are personalized by their sponsors in various ways: with a family name, in honor of a loved one, or with a quote:

"The earth laughs in flowers."
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Where flowers bloom, so does hope."
– Lady Bird Johnson

Plants are chosen for varying reasons, but all must be able to thrive within the confines of a flower box or hanging basket. Those which produce vibrantly-colored flowers, display distinctive foliage, and have a trailing habit are among top choices for inclusion.

Winning plant choices include: Parrot's beak (*Lotus berthelotii*), a stunning tropical plant with red, orange and yellow blooms; Lamb's ear (*Stachys byzantina*) with its woolly, velvety leaves so tempting to touch; chenille plants, also referred to as red-hot cattails or fox tail (*Acalypha hispida*), produce fuzzy red appendages with lengths up to 18 inches.

In contrast, strawflower (*Xerochrysum bracteatum*) produces daisy-like flowers with a texture just like the prickle of straw. Fiber optic grass (*Isolepis cernua*) provides electric excitement: sprays of green foliage are tipped with tiny flowers which wave about, giving the plant the look of a fiber optic lamp. Creeping rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* 'Prostratus') lends an attractive trailing habit and a pleasant pine-like scent.

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Meet Me At The Bridge — continued from previous page

Look closely and you will see more than flowers and foliage: birds' nests may be found in boxes, baskets and in the bridge's girders. Butterflies, hummingbirds, bees, wasps and beetles love this stop on the pathway for pollinators. Great Blue Heron fish in view of the bridge, visiting from the rookery downriver. Bald Eagles make regular flyovers and ducks paddle along. It's a symphony of flora and fauna.

A River of Daffodils

On an October day this past fall, over 20 volunteers planted 2000 daffodil bulbs on the sloping bank to the left of the bridge. This "river of daffodils" memorializes those who have been loved and lost over the years. In addition, 500 crocus bulbs were placed in the Hop Brook Landing Park's beds. William Wordsworth's words will be a joyous reality during this spring of 2022:

*"I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils ..."*

Looking Back to 1892

The iron bridge seen today was

constructed in 1892, with a narrow one-lane roadway designed in an age before motor vehicles. Once cars began to cross the bridge, long-time Simsbury residents remember that etiquette was "first come, first served." Stand-offs occurred when a driver started across the bridge out of turn. No doubt some interesting negotiations took place when two vehicles met in the middle!

The design, manufacture, and construction of the 1892 bridge, described as "a unique example of 19th century metal-truss bridge construction," was overseen by John E. Buddington, an engineer from New Haven. Of note, Buddington was a controversial figure. He was known to criticize the work of other engineers, who in turn described his designs as "eccentricities." Despite this long-ago drama, Buddington's 129-year-old bridge still stands today. It spans 183 feet with a 12-foot roadway, and is suspended 18 feet over the Farmington River.

A New Bridge

In 1955, the bridge became impassable following historic flooding caused by hurricanes Connie and Diane. Once the waters receded, it required ongoing

BURGERS ON THE BRIDGE

Wednesday, June 8, 4-7 PM
(rain date: June 9)

This community cookout, catered by Fitzgerald's Foods, is the annual fundraiser for the Flower Bridge. Tickets are sold on-site. Burgers, hotdogs, veggie burgers, beer, wine, soda and water are available. Desserts are served on the bridge itself. A fabulous way to hold a fundraiser: friends, food and flowers!

repairs. Simsbury residents debated the future of their bridge: To renovate the old bridge or to build a new one?

Discussion continued until March 1983, when taxpayers voted to approve the expenditure of local funds for a new bridge. In 1992, the new Drake Hill Bridge, just a few hundred feet north of the original bridge, was opened to 20th century traffic.

Saving the Old Bridge ... and Restoring It

Following the closure of the old bridge, some citizens felt that it should be demolished. Others, with wise foresight, submitted an application on behalf of the bridge to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The bridge's protection was ensured



The Flower Bridge on a rainy summer afternoon.

Photo / Ali M. Vassigh

in 1984 when the NRHP deemed it a “historic place worthy of preservation.”

Restoration took place in 1995. Lead paint was removed and bracings were replaced under the bridge. The structure was given a fresh coat of paint and a new wooden deck was installed. The full cost for restoration was \$472,000. Happily, the bridge re-opened to pedestrian and bicycle traffic, but this was not the end of the story!

Debut of the Flower Bridge

In 1996, Simsbury resident Dominique Avery energized town officials, local businesses and citizens with her passionate call to develop a community garden on and around the historic Old Drake Hill Bridge. A visit to the acclaimed Shelburne Falls Bridge of Flowers, planted in 1929 in northern Massachusetts, inspired her to similarly beautify the old iron bridge back home in Simsbury.

“She [Avery] contacted all the town organizations that had anything to do with gardening and tourism, the relevant town agencies and local garden center for an exploratory meeting.

The vision was ‘... a veritable “Hanging Gardens of Babylon” ’ with thousands of flowers spilling from window boxes and hanging baskets.” (Flower Bridge records, 1996)

In the summer of 1997, the first phase took form with just four flower boxes. From the start, this was a shared community project, with Simsbury High School students constructing the boxes, local garden centers donating flowers, and volunteers planting them. Since that first summer, the Flower Bridge has grown exponentially and now boasts 118 containers. Every avail-

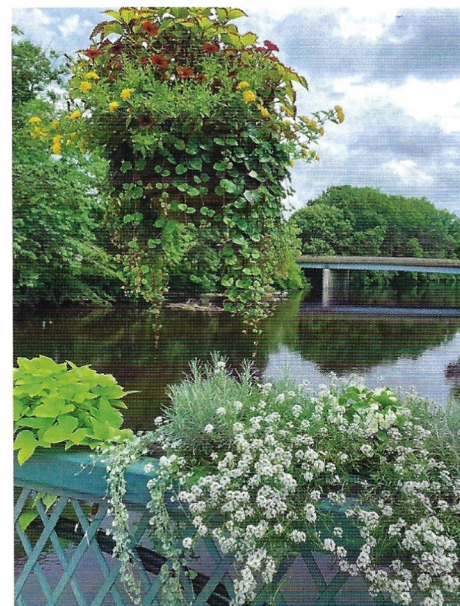
able space has been filled with stunning flower boxes and baskets.

How Does It All work?

Each fall, there is a design review to assess each plant’s bloom time, color, and adaptability to bridge conditions. It is interesting to note that the same plant, due to varying wind and sun conditions, may respond differently depending on which side of the bridge it is growing. During the review, decisions are made to phase out some plants and introduce others. In 2020, petunias were retired because they were difficult to maintain. Strawberries were introduced in 2021 – a success story! Little red fruits peeking from beneath the foliage of companion plants give visitors a cheery surprise.

In October, the next summer’s plants are ordered from Pickin’ Patch, a 350-year-old family-owned and operated farm in Avon. (Baskets are planted at the farm the following April, where they stay for two months to get a head start in the shelter of a greenhouse.) As winter approaches, the bridge takes on a festive air when evergreens and red bows take center stage for the cold months ahead.

On Memorial Day Weekend, the pre-planted baskets and individual plants for boxes are transported to the bridge for installation. The Flower Bridge is in its full glory throughout the summer with blooms continuing into September or even October, depending on the timing of the first hard frost. Dedicated volunteers visit daily, keeping the containers and cottage garden impeccably



maintained and photo-ready for the newly engaged couples, wedding parties, and everyone who visits.

Connection

Once upon a time, in a small town called Simsbury, there was a river. As often happens with river towns, people lived on both sides. A bridge spanned the river, connecting people with each other and with their town. As time passed, the bridge grew old and its future was uncertain. But the town worked together to save the bridge and create a new kind of connector: a place full of life with deep roots, open skies and framed in flowers.

Connections are powerful life supports. Make a call or send a text this spring to a special person in your life. All you need to say are five little words, “Meet me at the bridge.” ❁



CONTACT INFO

Old Drake Hill Flower Bridge (ODHFB), Inc. is a tax-exempt non-profit corporation under Section 501(c)(3).

Old Drake Hill Flower Bridge
1 Old Bridge Road
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www.simsbury-ct.gov
OldDrakeHillFlowerBridge on Facebook

To reserve use of the bridge for a special event, contact the Simsbury Culture, Parks & Recreation Dept. at (860) 658-3836. Fee: \$50