

Attleboro Springs The National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette Creating a Sanctuary Garden

Just one mile from the center of Attleboro, a small manufacturing city once known as the birthplace of the jewelry industry in New England, lies the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette. The Shrine attracts tens of thousands of visitors annually for retreats and an annual Christmas light festival. Built on the site of a historic spring, the Shrine and Retreat Center actually cover little of the over 120-acre property. The remaining acreage has been untouched for years, allowing it to return to its natural state of woodlands and fields, ponds and streams.

Since 1942, the work of the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Salette in Attleboro has been a mission of reconciliation and healing, with a focus on human to divine and human to human relationships. In recent years, the Shrine community has sought to extend that mission to foster healing between human and nature.



Their dream was to create a spiritual garden and trails through this wild property, to foster education about, and respect for, the natural world.

The Shrine community's first attempt to realize their vision for the land began more than 30 years ago with a plan to create a landscaped park for spiritual reflection. This plan, involving local community leaders and conservationists, was eventually rejected by La Salette officials as too costly and difficult to manage. As time passed, with the resident community aging and their numbers declining, the possibility that the property would be sold increased. And the need to find another option became more urgent.

In 2005, Reverend Roger Plante of the La Salette community attended a conference on conserving land presented by the Religious Lands Conservancy (RLC) project. This was the beginning of conversations between RLC and the La Salette community to create a practical expression of their vision for the land.

It quickly became clear that this effort would require resources from a number of different organizations. The unique circumstance of a large, natural area so close to an urban center offered great opportunity, along with some challenges. RLC invited Mass Audubon to join the discussion, to share their expertise in managing natural sites open to visitors.

It was agreed that Mass Audubon would first determine the land's value for conservation. Walking the property revealed many natural features worth preserving:

- Acres of oak and pine forests include mature 100-foot trees as well as extensive red maple swamps.
- From the large pond, woodland trails pass several vernal pools, streams, and the historic Attleboro Spring.
- The land is home to wild turkeys and a wide variety of other resident and migratory birds, and a number of animal species including white-tailed deer and fisher.
- Much of the site is designated by the state's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program as important to preservation of the state's biodiversity, and as priority habitat due to the presence of rare species.

A proposal to preserve these wonderful features was quickly approved by the local La Salette community. Mass Audubon, the Attleboro Land Trust and RLC joined the La Salettes in developing and refining a plan that could address previous concerns about cost and difficulty of management. This plan included:

- 110 acres of the property to be placed under a permanent conservation restriction.
- The City of Attleboro to join with Mass Audubon in applying for state grants to fund the creation of the type of sanctuary all envisioned.
- Private fund-raising, led by Mass Audubon and the Attleboro Land Trust, to provide the additional funds needed to create access to the site and support ongoing maintenance.
- Mass Audubon to develop and manage the sanctuary.

Reverend Plante presented this plan at the La Salette national chapter meeting in the fall of 2006. Fortuitously, the international La Salette order had recently issued a policy initiative calling on its congregation to assist groups working to conserve Earth's resources and to protect the integrity of creation.

The plan was approved.

Mayor Kevin Dumas of Attleboro called the property a "beautiful, pristine area" filled with opportunities for nature study, walking and contemplation. The 117 acres of conserved land will be of great worth to the community, particularly into the future as open space in the area becomes more and more rare. If the LaSalette order ever sells the shrine site, they have agreed to convey the land covered by the conservation restriction to the Mass Audubon Society. This land, to be called Attleboro Springs, will be the La Salette legacy to the community—a place of contemplation, reconciliation and healing into the future.

