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Hepola: Inside Mad Hatter's, the over-the-top gala that blossoms at the Dallas Arboretum

Behold the eye-popping hats of this annual event, an expression of Dallas women's creativity and a reminder of the society mavens who helped our city bloom.



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Masters Mavens, a group of women whose hats were inspired by different golf greats, won

best in show at the Mad Hatter's Luncheon, an annual fundraiser for the Dallas Arboretum on Thursday, April 17, 2025. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

"There's a girl with golf balls on her head," says Cindy Feld, pointing out a woman in the crowd at the Dallas Arboretum. The woman's hat is affixed with a green plastic bucket filled with golf balls, one of several Masters-inspired looks at the 2025 Mad Hatter's Luncheon, whose theme is "Celebrating Spring in the South."

Feld is the honorary chair of this annual event, which started more than three decades ago and turned into one of the most-anticipated charity galas of the year. More than 500 women (and a few men) stroll the arboretum on a breezy Thursday in mid-April, so many flowers on their head it's hard to tell where the hats end and the landscape begins.



Kunthea Mam-Douglas created a hat inspired by Louisiana for Mad Hatter's, a fundraiser for the Dallas Arboretum on Thursday, April 17, 2025. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

"I tried to capture Louisiana," says Kunthea Mam-Douglas, dipping down so I can study details — sprigs of cotton, a voodoo doll, butterflies — rising like a layer cake on her head.

Hats are an underrated fashion statement in Dallas, a city that once turned its nose up at the cowboy look. The hats on parade form a counterpoint to Dallas' conformist reputation, at once a wild expression of creativity and personality — sparkle, feathers, fringe, ribbon — and a decent way to shield the sun.



Amber Griffin at the Mad Hatter's Luncheon, an annual fundraiser for the Dallas Arboretum on Thursday, April 17, 2025. "Somebody thought these were real," she said of the plastic lavender sprigs atop her head. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

"I was going for a tribal look," says Amber Griffin, sleek as a model ([she is one](#)), her hair in a bun with a huge spray of lavender atop like a crown. "Somebody thought these were real," she says, smiling, about the plastic flowers on her head.

Maybe because so many flowers are. Fashion designer Anna Berman woke up at 4 a.m. to pluck her garden and create a hat whose massive bouquet would rival any bride's. Roses, calla lilies and jasmine drip with baby's breath from the wide and floppy brim. She hands me the hat to test its weight, and my hand droops. Ten pounds? Fifteen?

Heavy is the head that wears the crown.

'It was a bang from the beginning'

The story of the Mad Hatter's Luncheon points back to the [origin](#) of the Dallas Arboretum itself. In the late '60s, a woman named Nell Denman moved from Richmond, Va., hoping to visit Dallas' arboretum or botanical garden only to discover the city had neither.

Denman became part of a power group, including [philanthropist Margaret McDermott](#), hoping to remedy that. They created the Women's Council in 1982, but efforts had been

going on for years before that, including the discovery of land in East Dallas, then owned by Southern Methodist University, where the Dallas Arboretum began sprouting.



Carole Ann Brown, chair of the first Mad Hatter's Luncheon in the late '80s, during the annual fundraiser for the Dallas Arboretum on Thursday, April 17, 2025. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

That a cluster of flower-loving society mavens braved the boys' club of Dallas to create one of the city's crown jewels is a hero's tale akin to Ladybird Johnson planting wildflowers along our highways. The arboretum blossomed, but there was one problem: Not a lot of those society women actually went.

Thus, Mad Hatter's was born.

"It was a bang from the beginning," says Carole Ann Brown, chair of the first luncheon in the late '80s. She's standing in the shade in her elegant wide-brimmed hat. "We had contests just like now."



Guests at the Mad Hatter's Luncheon watch a runway show sponsored by NorthPark Center at the Dallas Arboretum on Thursday, April 17, 2025. (Anja Schlein / Special Contributor)

Mad Hatter's, still run by the Women's Council and chaired this year by Sara Friedman, is a big arboretum fundraiser. The bash includes lunch and a runway show sponsored by NorthPark Center, but the real draw is those hats.

A panel of judges gave individual awards to Maryam Brown, Christine Phelan, Debbie Murray and Mandi Bonilla, with a group award going to Taste of the Masters, in matching pink argyle. Best in show went to Masters Mavens, a group led by Katie Kennemer in sharp green jackets and hats inspired by different Masters winners. One of those women, I'm pretty sure, had a basket with golf balls on her head.

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