

In Full Bloom

Garden Valley Golf Club in Lindale has blossomed into an area favorite

By Robert Rodriguez

It's difficult for a course to live up to the hype when it is being compared to Augusta National Golf Club, the famed site of The Masters Tournament.

Heck, might as well call it a curse.

As often the case, these comparisons fall way short and are downright ridiculous. In the end, the course suffers in trying to meet those expectations; and ends up disappointing the golfer.

Lesson to all: It takes more than just a pine tree or two, and a meandering creek to describe a layout "like Augusta National."

Unless, you are Garden Valley Golf Club.

East of the Metroplex on Interstate 20 (which takes you to Augusta, Ga.) in Lindale, Garden Valley has been dubbed "The Augusta National of Texas." For once though, they got this description right. Garden Valley is perhaps the closest thing many of us will ever get to experiencing Augusta National. The course is consumed with towering pine trees, blooming azaleas and dogwoods, and rolling elevation changes that makes you wonder if you are in Texas or Georgia.

Designed by John Sanford, Garden Valley opened in 1991 and was owned by Japanese businessmen who had a vision of building resort-style courses outside large metropolitan areas throughout the United States. Over time, the club became neglected and course conditions were deteriorating. In 1999, the current course owners bought Garden Valley and immediately refurbished the club.

Despite being closer to Tyler than to Dallas, many Metroplex golfers know about or have played Garden Valley's Dogwood Course. The club also has the nine-hole Hummingbird Course, which is a par-35 softie that is a great beginners course. But the star attraction is the Dogwood Course, and the breathtaking challenges that await on this par-72, 6,754-yard golfing arboretum.

A Round at Garden Valley Golf Club

Address: 22049 FM Road 1995, Garden Valley, TX 75771
Phone Number: (903) 882-6107

Designer: John Sanford

Year Opened: 1991

Par/Yardage: 72/6,754 yards (Back); 6,269 yards (Middle); 5,532 yards (Front)

Fairways: 419 Bermuda

Greens: Champion Bermuda

Normal Rates: \$45 Monday-Thursday; \$65 Friday-Sunday (includes cart and practice balls)

Toughest hole: #9 – Measuring 595 yards, this par-5 throws everything at you but alligators and quicksand. Your tee shot must avoid the bunkers on the right and be short of the water cutting across the fairway. Anything left is dead in the trees and the driving range. The second shot must clear the water and avoid bunkers on the left and a small pond on the right. It's useless to think about going for this green in two. The approach must steer clear of the bunkers on the right and a pond fronting the green on the left. Don't go after the pin if it's tucked behind the water.

Best chance at birdie: #16 – This par-4 measures just 362 yards and doglegs right. Avoid the bunker at the elbow of the dogleg for a short iron/wedge shot into the green. Bunkers guard both sides of the green, but are pretty escapable.

Most scenic hole(s): #4 – The hole dips toward the water on this par-3, before rising back up at the green. The trees also frame this hole nicely.

#11 – The tree-lined fairway and the lake on the left make this a breathtaking hole.

#12 – Besides the lake once again on the left, the azaleas on the right add a beautiful splash of color to this tough par-3.

#13 – Elevated tees and azaleas on right side of fairway makes this splendid hole even more memorable.

#14 – The tree in the middle of the fairway and the azaleas behind the green add a dazzling touch to a surprisingly difficult hole.

#15 – The lake provides a beautiful backdrop on this par-3.

Hole(s) that could use some work: Front nine – Layout-wise, these holes are stout. Beauty-wise, they could be a wee bit better. Planting more azaleas and dogwoods on this side of the course would add even more character to these holes. Rob Shields, general manager and director of golf at Garden Valley, said future plans call for more pine trees to be planted on the front nine.

You might know this: Garden Valley Golf Club has the best-looking cart girls in the area. And many of them live in a small town west of the course in Van. Choosing a homecoming and prom queen must be a difficult chore at the local high school there.

Ammo needed: Four balls. There are several watery graves in precarious spots, but most of the areas in the trees are clean enough that you can find your stray ball.

Course record: 63.

Tip from Pro: "Watch out for the two blind shots on the course, the water fronting the green on the fifth hole and the water in the landing area on No. 9." – Shields.



"You won't find this layout around, especially in West Texas where I grew up," said Rob Shields, general manager and director of golf at Garden Valley. "You just don't find 100-foot pine trees and beautiful azaleas and dogwoods on many courses."

The first hole is a great preview of the Dogwood Course. This straight-away par-4 starts downhill, with a group of trees on the left side in front of the bunker and a lone tree on the right. From there, the layout inclines toward the green.

One of the best holes on the front side is No. 3, a tricky par-4 that demands a carry over water on the left to reach the fairway. The hole is angled so that the more you cut over the water, the closer you are to the green. However, you want your drive on the right side of the fairway because trees on the left can block any approach to the green. The hole snakes around the trees on the left to the green, which is protected by a bunker front right.

"We actually added 60 yards with the back tee, so it plays more like 420 yards," Shields said. "I didn't like the hole before we built that new back tee box, but now I love it. Before, you could hit a 3-wood over the corner to the green. Now it's just impossible."

Another outstanding hole is the par-3 fourth, which measures 165 yards. From the tee boxes, the hole dips toward a pond, before rising to the green. Any shot short of the green will roll back down dangerously close to the water. And any shot flying the green will catch the bunker back left or get caught in the azaleas.

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The rule of thumb at Garden Valley is to play smart, not only because of the trees, but also because of some hazards that could sneak up on you. Such is the case on the par-5 fifth hole. Measuring 526 yards, No. 5 is a tight driving hole with trees and a ditch left, and more trees on the right. From the fairway, it's a blind shot to the green. What you also can't see is a pond fronting the green on the left. The putting surface is long, so if the pin is behind the water and you favor the right side of the green with your approach, be ready for a tricky and long putt.

The sixth and seventh holes are par 4s that meander through the trees before venturing out to the open areas. The par-4, eighth stretches to a healthy 456 yards, but usually plays downwind. While it lists as the toughest hole on the front side, it's the ninth hole that is actually more difficult.



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THE GARDEN VALLEY GIRLS
From left: Belinda Moore, Cescie Noble, Kaycee Noble, Megan Goff, Ashley Payne and Lindsey Felcman.

Measuring 595 yards, No. 9 demands accuracy from tee to green. Off the tee, you must avoid bunkers on the right and trees on the left. Your tee shot must be long, but not so long that it reaches the water cutting across the fairway. Still left with more than 250 yards to the green, your layup shot must fly over the water and shy away from another water hazard on the right and bunkers on the left. Know the pin position before you hit your approach shot, as a pond fronts this shallow green on the left and two bunkers are positioned on the right.

Another par-5 awaits on No. 10, and the start of the most beautiful part of the golf course. The hole is reachable in two, as long as you split the trees the entire way.

Garden Valley's "Amen Corner" begins on the 11th hole with a dazzling downhill par-4 that bends to the right. What makes this layout spectacular is the sparkling lake on the left. Next is a long par-3 that features the lake on the left, as well as beautiful azaleas on the right side and a back to front sloping green. The 13th hole is another downhill par-4, only this one doglegs left. The lone tree and the azaleas on the right side provide a captivating view off the tee, but are menaces on your tee shot. Once again, the lake on the left is the main attraction.

"The 12th is such a great hole from tee to green," Shields said. "And No. 13 is one of my favorites because of all the azaleas and dogwoods on that hole."

The scenic views don't stop there. Even though it measures just 355 yards, No. 14 is a surprisingly difficult hole. The hole doglegs left, but it's wise to use a long iron off the tee because of the pond fronting the green. Azaleas behind the putting surface provide a colorful setting for a dangerous approach.

The 15th hole also has an amazing backdrop – the lake. It takes an accurate mid-iron shot to reach this undulating green. Anything deep and left of the putting surface makes for a delicate up-and-down. All in all, holes 11-15 are as fabulous of a fivesome as you will find anywhere.

Your round at Garden Valley ends with a beautiful par-5. Trees line the left side of this 519-yard hole, while native grasses dominate the right side. The hole does offer some legitimate eagle chances, as long as you avoid the bunkers front right. Pleasing to the eye and to your scorecard, what more could you want in a finishing hole?



"That is my favorite par-5 out here," Shields said. "You're hitting back to the clubhouse and it's reachable in two, so you can play it many different ways."

It's almost impossible to regard any course like Augusta National. But Garden Valley Golf Club definitely has some characteristics that make it the average Joe Duffer's version of the storied course. With the rolling topography, blooming flowers and towering pines, a journey east to Garden Valley should be on your foursome's itinerary for a Masters Tournament of your own.

And the best time to play the course? When else, after Masters weekend. **AG**

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