Tucked away on the northeast edge of campus and hidden behind evergreen hedges is Capen Garden, one of the secret garden treasures at Smith. The garden hosts a spectacular display of over 2000 tulips, which will burst forth in pinks and reds this spring.

Bessie Capen, one of the first women to graduate from M.I.T., was hired in 1876 to teach botany as well as chemistry at Smith. She later founded the Capen School, adjacent to the Smith campus. The College acquired the Capen School in 1921, giving the Botanic Garden a new garden space, which was redesigned by Kate Ries Koch. In 1934 Dorcas Brigham and the horticulture class designed and planted an additional area of the garden. Today, Capen Garden is still used by horticulture students as an outdoor laboratory and work space, as well as by those in the know seeking a quiet place of refuge.

The garden is designed as a series of outdoor rooms each with its own character. At the western end you’ll find Capen Shop, where much of our equipment is stored and where most of our outdoor gardeners are based. Our new production greenhouse is also located here (sorry, the greenhouse is not open to the public, although those of you who attended our plant sale last September got a glimpse inside). From here one enters Capen Garden through a 65-foot rustic rose arbor lined with perennial beds. Adjoining the arbor is the Carol Brown Knot Garden (the former site of the Herb Garden), dedicated in 1989 to honor Carol Brown ’11, in commemoration of her 100th birthday. Milly Ellis, who took horticulture with Gregory Armstrong in 1983, designed the original garden. Today the intricate pattern of the knot is created with dwarf boxwood and a dwarf barberry, Berberis ‘Crimson Pygmy.’ In the center of the knot stand four rosemary plants pruned as standards and overwintered in the greenhouses.

The rose arbor leads into the next garden space, which contains perennials arranged in borders and island beds and surrounded at the two entrances by Kalmia latifolia, mountain laurel.