

# How to Increase Saugatuck Area Tourism in Spring and Fall

By Jeff Scott, Co-Owner, The Owl House

Saugatuck and Douglas are known as the “Art Coast” of Michigan, and many tourists come to enjoy the natural beauty of the lakes and rivers, as well as the small-town ambiance, historic architecture, diversity-inclusive attitude, and artist community. However, business owners and workers suffer from the economic limitation of a short summer. For businesses involved in lodging, restaurants and retail, it is extraordinarily difficult to survive on a three-month busy season and a nine-month slow season. Business expenses for mortgages, rents, utilities and wages remain year-round. Many businesses close for the off-season because revenues plummet and paying workers to stay open would be just one more expense. Workers suffer seasonal income loss from reduced hours, tips, and lay-offs.

However, one important reason people don’t visit as much in spring and fall is because so many shops are closed. We have been stuck in this dilemma for decades. It is fair to say that everyone in our community recognizes these issues, but we have not yet found ways to attract more visitors in the “shoulder seasons” of March, April and May, and September through December.

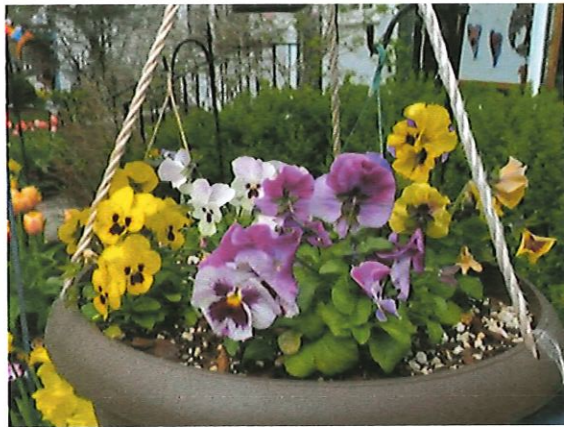
I currently co-own, with Fran Mervau, The Owl House gift shop, on Butler Street in Saugatuck, which is in our tenth year of business. I am not well-known in Saugatuck, but I grew up in Holland and have been around Saugatuck since the 1960s. I remember when the Pavilion burned. I climbed sand dunes and Baldhead, swam in the Oxbow, surfed on Lake Michigan, and ate smoked chubs from the commercial fisherman on Water Street. I appreciate the heritage of this beautiful area. As an adult, I lived in multiple other states, including Hawaii, and I fully appreciate the qualities that are so special to the Saugatuck and Douglas area.

We need to create a reason for tourists to visit in the shoulder seasons. Our target should not only be out-of-state visitors, but also from Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and the rest of Michigan. What experiences can we offer that will motivate people for day trips and longer stays?

**A Proposed Solution:** After long, gray winters, people long to get outdoors and see signs of spring. After dreary winter, we want to see and feel Life -- and spring flowers elicit happiness, joy and hope. What can that look like? Take a look at my shop this April:







This is just a small-scale demonstration of what downtown Saugatuck and Douglas could look like in April. At the end of winter, a large display of color and life is noticed and appreciated. Enthusiastic feedback from our (too few) visitors has been overwhelming. Everyone I asked said large plantings of flowers would be a tremendous reason to visit Saugatuck in spring.

Flower plantings can continue from late March and April through the end of October, and into November. Imagine many large planters along sidewalks and hanging baskets bursting with vibrant color. Instead of removing pots of flowers after Labor Day, they can be left until frost. Additional cold-tolerant flowers like garden mums, asters, pansies and ornamental kale can bloom into November. I believe this has the potential to transform Saugatuck and Douglas from empty streets to crowds of visitors.

The summer flower pots planted by the Saugatuck and Douglas Garden Club are greatly appreciated. That activity should be continued, but it alone is not enough. We need to expand the scale and effort by at least 20 or 30 times and extend through the spring and fall seasons. A large effort is required to produce a large result, and it won't all happen in just one season or year. It will take a concerted effort over multiple years to grow, promote and build a reputation.

The flower displays provide a foundation for additional activities like special events. A Spring Fest in mid-April and a Fall Fest at Halloween can be additional reasons for visitors to experience the Saugatuck and Douglas area. The Douglas Halloween Parade already has a dedicated public following, and we can build on that.

Clearly, this effort will require financial support. There are multiple organizational, logistical, labor and financial elements that need to be addressed. Cooperation by multiple organizations, such as CVB, The Saugatuck Garden Club, the city councils of Saugatuck and Douglas and others will be important. Now is the time for you to engage and participate in creating a spectacular display in downtown Saugatuck and Douglas. A beautiful community is beneficial to residents and good for business.

Please call me at (808) 772-3833 or email The Owl House at [TheOwlHouseSaugatuck@yahoo.com](mailto:TheOwlHouseSaugatuck@yahoo.com)

Thank you, and let's do it!

Jeff Scott, Ph.D.

(retired horticulture professor and agricultural scientist)