The Impact and History of Botanic Gardens

A beautiful and tranquil oasis amidst the hustle and bustle of the city. A fascinating perspective on various species living side by side. Inspiration to plant new and different plants in your garden. An outdoor classroom to make science real for schoolchildren. A lovely backdrop for special occasions. A resource for sustainability and conservation. A botanic garden provides all this, and more!

The collection, display, and study of plants has a long and changing history. Thousands of years ago, across the globe, royalty used their gardens to display plants they gathered in collecting trips and military campaigns. Due to their economic trade value, these plants were carefully cultivated. Fast forward to medieval times, and the expansive gardens of Islamic Spain resembled our modern botanic gardens. Gardeners and botanists experimented with seeds, cuttings, and roots gathered from afar for economic, aesthetic, and scientific purposes. At the same time, medical schools in Italy and Spain included physic gardens, where herbs were cultivated for medicinal purposes.

During the European Renaissance, the first true botanical gardens focused on scientific and academic learning were established in Pisa, Padua, and Florence. These gardens shared seeds and plants, herbarium specimens, and botanic drawings. As Britain, France, Spain, and the Netherlands expanded their empires, botanic gardens spread worldwide as colonies used them to grow economic and medical crops to support the home country.

Early in our own history, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, all experienced farmers, shared a dream for a national botanic garden. They envisioned an institution to collect, grow, and distribute plants worldwide to contribute to the welfare of the American people. Their dream came to fruition in 1850 when the U.S. Botanic Garden was established.

As we moved into the 20th century, the focus of botanic gardens shifted to public education and conservation. Botanic gardens began to develop special cultivation and propagation techniques to preserve threatened species. As populations and consumption increased, global biodiversity decreased, as we saw with the destruction of the rainforests. Botanic gardens now play a strong role in preserving and promoting biodiversity and sustainability of the natural world, critical to sustaining life of all forms.

Worldwide, there are nearly 1,800 botanic gardens and arboreta in 148 countries. Houston will soon join the botanic garden community and enrich life through discovery, education, and the conservation of plants and the natural environment.
Dear Friends,

Spring is such an exciting time of year! I love seeing the flowers bloom and new green leaves grow, particularly after our February freeze. Many exciting things are also happening here at the Houston Botanic Garden.

I am delighted to announce the launch of the Grow Houston’s Garden capital campaign to raise funds that will bring the vision for the Houston Botanic Garden to life. Jim Reeder and I are leading the campaign as co-chairs and we are joined by Susie and Mel Glasscock as honorary chairs. Garden enthusiasts who are eager to share their love of plants and nature are joining us on the committee to make this campaign a great success.

The campaign for Phase 1 will raise the $30 million needed to lay down the infrastructure that will support the full master plan and to construct the essential elements to welcome visitors to the Houston Botanic Garden in 2020. Phase 1 represents more than one-third of the projected cost of fully implementing the master plan. Our lease with the City of Houston requires us to raise $20 million by December 31 of this year, which will allow us to break ground on the site in 2018. Thanks to the generosity of early supporters, more than $9 million in commitments have been received to date.

As one of our lead donors emphasized in making his gift, partnering with the City of Houston to secure this property (valued at approximately $50 million) is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Every gift to the campaign will help us to create a beautiful destination in a wonderful location—one that is ideal for inspiring a love of plants and showcasing the ecosystems of the Bayou City.

One of the most exciting things for me is taking people to see the site for the first time. Their eyes light up as they see and hear first-hand what this place will become and what an extraordinary asset it will be for all Houstonians. It seems miraculous that over the next few years, this location will be transformed into a series of wonderfully colorful and varied collection and display gardens. Where there is now a lonely stretch of bayou, there will be a charming bridge beckoning visitors to cross onto a lovely island and discover nature’s delights. From people with little knowledge of plants to experienced horticulturists, everyone will come together to admire the beauty of a blossom and the grandeur of an oak. The visionary plans that now exist on paper will soon come to life.

This is such an exciting time for the Houston Botanic Garden. Thank you for embracing the vision and supporting our efforts to Grow Houston’s Garden!

Nancy O’Connor Abendshein
Board Chair

We wish to congratulate Joe Turner on his retirement and thank him for his commitment to improving Houston’s support of the Houston Botanic Garden!
Annual Meeting of the Texas Association of Botanic Gardens and Arboreta

The Texas Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta was created in 1991 by a few Texas horticulture giants, including Dr. David Creech, its president for life. These visionaries created a vehicle for garden leaders to get together and share in the joys and tribulations of gardening in Texas.

Claudia Gee Vassar presented the plans for the Houston Botanic Garden and connected with many garden leaders from across the state to share experiences and wisdom. These relationships will be invaluable as HBG continues to Grow Houston’s Garden. The amount of plant and garden operation knowledge in the room was astounding. The TABGA Annual Meeting always ends with a plant swap and HBG looks forward to participating in future years!

Peckerwood Garden Site Visit

Members of the Houston Botanic Garden team recently visited Peckerwood Garden, which is located in Hempstead, just outside of Houston. This garden, founded in the early 1970’s by artist John G. Fairy, is a treasure trove of plants from around the world, primarily Mexico. Mr. Fairy traveled the world on a series of collecting expeditions to gather seeds of rare and endangered plants. It is an incredible oasis of peace and beauty and provided great inspiration for our vision becoming a reality.

Peckerwood conserves many threatened species which are no longer found in the wild and reflects the artistic style of plant combinations that is unique to Mr. Fairy. Adam Black, Peckerwood’s Director of Horticulture, gave our group a tour of the site, highlighting many rare species and how Peckerwood survived two massive floods, losing very few plants. We look forward to partnering with Peckerwood as we Grow Houston’s Garden.

Congratulations Joe Turner on his retirement and thank him for his commitment serving Houston’s parks and Houston Botanic Garden!
Consider Zephyranthes for Your Garden

Rain lily, fairy lily, zephyr lily—all are common names for Zephyranthes, the charming plant that brings an element of surprise that is always a joy in the garden. These small bulbs are called “rain lily” because a few days after a good thunderstorm they will burst into bloom. From spring through fall they will produce flushes of star-shaped flowers utilizing water from the hose or sprinkler, but they know the difference and are most prolific after a good rain. Zephyranthes is a tiny member of the Amaryllidaceae family. The name Zephyranthes is of Greek origin for “Zephyrus’, the Greek god of the west wind, and “anthos” meaning flower. The thought is that a west wind typically brings the showers needed for maximum bloom.

Zephyranthes species have a single, upward facing or slightly nodding flower perched on each stem, whereas Habranthus species flowers are held at an angle and occur in groups of two or three per stem. They are excellent border plants, ground cover, planted in clumps in a perennial border or in containers. They should be planted 1-2 inches deep, and 4-6 inches apart. They do well in sun or in partial shade, and grow best in a moist well-drained soil. They can survive drought as well.

The flowers are usually white, pink, or yellow depending on the species, but there are many new hybrids in shades of peach, orange, red, and multicolor. In our climate, they will multiply, naturalize, and for the most part, are evergreen and hardy. The rain lily makes a lot of seeds, which may be gathered or left to fall and naturalize. The flat black seeds do not store well and lose viability if not sown right away. Sow fresh seeds on a moist potting soil and lightly cover with soil. The plants can also be propagated by division.

Garden culture for these small amaryllids is simple, and most varieties thrive throughout Texas and the South having migrated from their native American tropics or reached our land with enthusiastic plant explorers. In meadows and fields wild rain lilies can be found in flower, but wherever they grow, they count on thunderstorms to stir them into bloom. In the Texas hill country, a good rain will find them as single blooms or in clumps when their small scapes have risen from the ground. Once in your garden, you will find them in unexpected but welcome places. In much of the South, Zephyranthes candida is a roadside flower, and many Zephyranthes can be found around old homesteads.

Some good Zephyranthes for Houston are:

- **Zephyranthes candida**: White-tinged pink flower
- **Z. grandiflora**: Rose pink flower on 8” stems
- **Z. citrina**: Fragrant, yellow flower
- **Z. Cooperia**: Texas native, night blooming, white, ivory, or sulfur colored
- **Z. atamasco**: Ideal early season accent, white flower, often called Easter lily of the South

Rain lily bulbs can be found at some local garden centers usually in containers. These will take a little longer to bloom after planting. They can also be found on the Internet and mail order nurseries.

A search for some of the beautiful hybrid Zephyranthes is well worth your time. The rain lily clan is vast, and it holds small gems and treasures. Include some of these in your garden, and you will learn to hold them dear.

- submitted by Nancy S. Thomas