Garden Visits Confirm Priorities and Generate Ideas

Houston Botanic Garden (HBG) board members have been traveling to botanic gardens across the country to gather ideas, information, and inspiration. After a 2-day whirlwind trip to premier botanic gardens in Chicago and St. Louis, Steve Lindley (Planning Committee Chair), Richard McDugald (Board Member), and Claudia Gee Vassar (Interim Executive Director), gained many valuable insights. Here are a few key lessons we learned:

Education is the heart of a botanic garden.

A very large component at both gardens was educational programming, particularly for children. Learning experiences were unique, in a way that cannot be replicated in a traditional classroom. However, what is intriguing to a home gardener is not the same as for a teen or a preschooler. We are looking at how to engage visitors of ALL ages, in ways that are fun and inspire curiosity about and appreciation for plants and the natural world.

Selecting the right mix of collections and gardens is challenging, but important.

On our tours, we viewed a wide variety of gardens — formal, demonstration, international, edible, therapeutic, and more. We also enjoyed seeing extensive collections, from bonsai trees to orchids to water lilies to camellias. With an endless array of options for our garden, we are excited to explore the possibilities and find the right collections and gardens to make Houston’s garden enjoyable and unique.

A sustainable funding model is critical.

Both gardens we visited have a diverse funding model that includes significant earned revenue and public funding. Earned revenue helps support the ongoing operating costs of a garden, but investments from passionate organizations and individuals are necessary to create many of the iconic features, meaningful programs, and exciting events at the garden.

The leaders of these botanic gardens are incredibly helpful in sharing their experiences in preparation for when we, too, will attract 1 million visitors a year.

“Look deep into nature, and you will understand everything better.”
- Albert Einstein
Letter from the Board Chair

Dear Friends,

Each time I set foot in a garden, a sense of calm takes over. The worries and lists and life don’t weigh quite as much. Escaping the hustle and bustle of the city to be surrounded by beautiful gardens reminds me of the beauty in life and this world. There is peace.

The idea for the Houston Botanic Garden began decades ago. After visiting gorgeous botanic gardens across the U.S., Nancy Thomas, Kay Crooker, and Anita Stude asked themselves a bold question: “Why not here?” Today their vision is coming to life.

Last year, HBG entered a long-term lease with the City of Houston for a 120-acre site on Sims Bayou that has a beautiful rolling topography and mature tree canopy – a true diamond in the rough. With a location secured, internationally renowned landscape design firm, West 8, developed a visionary master plan for HBG with an array of features that will be implemented in stages over the next 20 years. Our goals are to:

- Provide an oasis for contemplation, learning, inspiration, and research;
- Enrich lives through outstanding collection and display gardens and programs;
- Serve as a model for sustainability; and
- Inspire all who visit to become environmental stewards as they learn more about plants and the natural world.

Thanks to the City’s support and early contributions from generous donors – including lead gifts from The Brown Foundation, the Alkek Foundation, the Susan Vaughan Foundation, and the Gordon A. Cain Foundation, along with Board members and friends – we have secured over $7 million in commitments toward our initial $20 million fundraising milestone. Reaching this milestone will allow us to begin construction on the first phase of the Garden in 2018, which will include collection and display gardens, greenhouses, the entrance bridge from Park Place Boulevard, flexible event spaces, and essential facilities and infrastructure.

Leading this work is our new Interim Executive Director, Claudia Gee Vassar. I know you will agree that she is the ideal leader for the organization at this important time. We are also pleased to welcome Gail Hendryx, Jose Rocha, Temple Webber, and Joe Turner (ex officio) to our Board of Directors and Mary Beth Arcidiacono, Elizabeth Boss, Laura Easton, Gary Moss, and The Very Reverend Barkley S. Thompson to our Advisory Council.

All this exciting activity is propelling us forward to create an oasis of peace in this great city. Thank you for your support and commitment to help us Grow Houston’s Garden!

Nancy O’Connor Abendshein
Board Chair

A garden is….

an institution holding documented collections of living plants for the purposes of scientific research, conservation, display, and education. Simply put, … a plant museum.
Remarkable Impact for Houston

In the not too distant past, the area where the Garden will be located was considered a showpiece suburb of Houston. Bringing the Garden to this part of Houston will help revitalize the nearby community and make an important impact on the Houston economy. In connection with our construction of the Garden, the City of Houston has agreed to invest at least $1 million to road improvements near the Garden. This is the first step to creating a lovely garden district. Between construction and future operations, the garden will also support hundreds of jobs.

While the Garden’s main focus is on the local Houston community, we expect that about 20% of our visitors will come from out of town, translating to millions of dollars in local spending. The Dallas Arboretum and Botanic Garden performed an economic impact study in 2011 and determined that their overall impact on the region’s economy is $50-100 million a year. We hope to one day have a similar or even greater local impact. We do expect to attract at least 100,000 total visitors during the first year of operations and over 500,000 visitors by year five, which translates into more than $20 million in economic impact per year!

“The glory of gardening:
hand in the dirt,
head in the sun,
heart with nature.
To nurture a garden is
to feed not just the
body, but the soul.”
- Alfred Austin

The Houston Botanic Garden will:

- Protect biological diversity, provide opportunities to engage in scientific research, and educate the public about plants, gardens, and the importance of conservation.
- Preserve and enhance 120 acres of green space just a few miles from the center of Houston’s urban core.
- Provide significant health benefits, as visiting a garden correlates with better mental health and lower rates of anxiety, obesity, depression, and cardiovascular disease.
- Offer diverse educational programming for all ages, such as home gardening, botanical illustration, yoga, sustainability practices, cooking, and more.
- Contribute meaningfully to plant and resource conservation and sustainability efforts through practice and education.
- Enhance the lives of native animals by providing native vegetation and authentic habitats that have become scarce within the growing city limits.

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<th>Number of Annual Visitors to Botanic Gardens</th>
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Additions to Our Team

Young Professionals Gather for the Garden

On November 3rd, nearly 100 young professionals gathered for an inaugural event at the Kirby Ice House. The happy hour was co-chaired by Mary Wakefield Newall and Blair Loocke. After learning more about the Garden, some of our city’s rising leaders shared their thoughts and ideas about what young adults and young families would like to see and do in the Garden. This energetic group looks forward to hosting more events and educational opportunities in 2017!

Additions to Our Team

In September, HBG welcomed Claudia Gee Vassar as our Interim Executive Director. She succeeds Jeff Ross, whose tireless work to secure our site will be appreciated forever. Claudia is a native Houstonian and Rice graduate who earned a law degree from the University of Virginia. Mid-career, she began providing leadership and consulting services to nonprofits during periods of transition. Claudia will lead HBG until the national search for a new President and CEO has been completed.

Jose L. Leal recently joined HBG as our Office Manager. Jose comes to HBG after 9 years at the MFAH. At the museum, he worked in various roles in the special events department, culminating in his role as Operations Manager. Jose is a native Houstonian and grew up near the site of the future Garden. He received a BA from Rice and is working on an MBA at UH-D. His extensive experience and interest in bringing a garden to fruition in Houston make him an incredible addition to our team.

HBG is excited to announce that we have selected a project manager, Venturi Outcomes, LLC, to help guide us through construction of the garden. Owner, Lorrie Foreman, comes highly recommended with over 33 years of experience and a tremendous portfolio, including the recent construction of the Houston Zoo’s Gorilla habitat, renovation of the George R. Brown Convention Center, and construction of the Houston Ballet building downtown.

“Gardening is the art that uses flowers and plants as paint, and the soil and sky as canvas.”

– Elizabeth Murray

Did you know:

Over 5 million living plant collections are maintained worldwide by botanic gardens and arboreta in 148 countries.

Nearly 1/3 of the known vascular plant species of the world are documented in botanic gardens and arboreta collections.

There are over 350 botanic gardens in North America, including one in every major city in the U.S., except Houston.

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