Bird Counting on the Bayou

There is nothing quite as majestic as seeing a bald eagle in its natural habitat. The Houston Botanic Garden staff had the opportunity to witness that rare sight during the 118th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count this past December. Known as the nation’s longest-running community science bird project, this year-end event gathers tens of thousands of people across North America to record species and numbers of avian wildlife. The collected data is then entered into a database which researchers and wildlife agencies can access for information pertaining to the status and health of bird populations across the continent. This continuous updating allows for collaboration in the reporting of climate change and its effects on endangered bird species.

Houston is part of the Central Flyaway, making it a hot spot for birding year round. There were 23 Christmas Bird Counts in the Greater Houston Area this past year. Most were organized by Houston Audubon, the Houston Parks and Recreation Department, independent volunteers, or other green organizations. HBG took part in the Central Houston count which included surveying the future home of the Houston Botanic Garden on Sims Bayou. With the guidance of Houston Audubon’s Education Director Mary Anne Weber and her staff, the HBG representatives were educated on subjects ranging from identifying different bird calls to learning the difference between a Goldfinch and a Warbler.

This enlightening experience led to a newfound partnership between HBG and Houston Audubon. Monthly bird surveys will now be conducted on the Houston Botanic Garden site on the first Thursday of every month at 8:00 a.m. “This monthly survey will help assess the current bird population and the changes to the population as the grounds are converted into the botanic garden. Houston Audubon’s Sims Bayou Urban Nature Center sits across from this land along the historic meander of the bayou and already has a species list over 100. We anticipate the future botanic garden to become a hotspot for birds with a species list well over 200,” states Mary Anne Weber.

All are welcome to participate. You do not need to be an experienced birder. Email maweber@houstonaudubon.org if you have questions, need to borrow binoculars, or would like to join the count. A typical bird survey is 2 hours long, but people can come and go as they please.

Eager volunteers are needed for this study, and we hope that individuals can, in turn, learn more about birding in the process. “Habitats across the Houston area are shrinking, and Houston Audubon is excited to work with Houston Botanic Garden as they make decisions about this very important property,” Weber said. Houston Botanic Garden will work to incorporate plants that attract and provide habitat to the birds in the area. Perhaps, in the not too distant future, more bald eagles will find sanctuary in the Garden.

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Letter from the Board Chair

Dear Friends,

2017 was quite the year for the Houston Botanic Garden! One big accomplishment was the completion of our schematic design process. We are now moving into design development and construction drawings as we watch the Garden become more of a reality. When showing off our lovely, illustrative renderings, people are amazed at the beauty our future Garden will hold. While the Houston Botanic Garden will be stunning and breathtaking, I hope our visitors derive more from their experience than just observing pretty flowers, including:

- A newfound understanding and appreciation for our natural world,
- Increased awareness of conservation practices, green infrastructure, and the importance of environmental research,
- Enlightenment about plant species and our diverse Houston ecosystem,
- Encouragement to grow native plants and information on how to do so,
- A restorative experience and escape from the concrete jungle, and
- Empowerment to create positive change in the local community and environment.

As we continue to develop WHAT we are creating, it is equally important to step back and remember WHY we’re doing it. The Houston Botanic Garden hopes to be an influential cultural institution, where all Houstonians and visitors come together, have fun, and learn about nature. We are already working on developing exciting educational programs for all ages and forming partnerships with many Houston organizations offering quality programming. We have begun investigating research opportunities, like our new monthly bird surveys, that will benefit the entire region. I firmly believe that the Houston Botanic Garden will be a tremendous asset to our City.

I hope you are all having a wonderful start to 2018! I look forward to keeping you up to date on our progress this year as we continue to Grow Houston’s Garden.

Nancy O’Connor Abendshein
Board Chair

Addition to the Team

HBG welcomes Laura A. Easton, to our team as Vice President of Development and Marketing. She has been a devoted volunteer for the organization serving on the Advisory Council and as an active member of the Development Committee. Laura is well-respected for over 20 years of experience in nonprofit development, board relations, marketing and communications, and successful capital campaigns, through holding various nonprofit leadership positions and through Easton Consulting. Laura graduated from St. John’s School, received her advertising degree from SMU and her master of social work with special emphasis in organization development from University of Houston. She also earned her CFRE (certified fund raising executive) certification last year. Laura is thrilled to be joining HBG fulltime and only wishes her mother Ziggy were here to watch us Grow Houston’s Garden!
A Conversation with HBG Designers, West 8

West 8 is an award-winning international office for urban design and landscape architecture, founded in 1987 with offices in Rotterdam, New York and Belgium. Over the last three decades West 8 has established itself as a leading practice with an international team of 70 architects, urban designers, landscape architects and industrial engineers. In 2015, Houston Botanic Garden unanimously chose West 8 to lead the development of a master plan and public outreach process for a botanic garden on 120-acres at Glenbrook Golf Course.

Q: What was the inspiration for the Houston Botanic Garden design?

A: Houston Botanic Garden has an incredible site to begin with: 120-acres of greenfield ringed by the historic Sims meander and bisected by the Sims channel. This entire waterfront naturally lends itself to a garden that has a large proportion of riparian, native gardens ringing the central spaces. These edges are thought of as flood resilient repositories for native workhorses, which are also incredibly beautiful plant communities. The island made by the bayou reinforced one of the most important aspects of gardens throughout history, that they are oases of order, cultivation, and heightened beauty that humanity has carved out of the wilderness. This contrast is what makes gardens so transformative and universal, and also so important for our souls. So, the Garden will in fact become a large paradise in the city, framed by Houston’s most authentic wilderness, its bayous.

Q: What is your favorite part about Houston?

A: The people and the food! We have found the client group and all the people in the Houston Botanic Garden community to be incredibly warm, welcoming, and optimistic. We knew already that Houston is one of the most diverse cities in the U.S., but spending time here, we really understand how diversity and multiculturalism brings us all greater wisdom, joy, and strength to make a great future, together. And we shouldn’t forget, this results in an incredible cuisine only found in Houston.

Q: From a designer’s standpoint, what do you want the visitors to get out of their experience in the Garden?

A: We hope that the overall feeling of the Garden is one of welcome and invitation for all Houstonians (and Houston’s visitors); the Garden should feel like every person’s piece of paradise. The design itself will boldly showcase the great range of beautiful species that can grow in Houston, an overwhelming range of colors, textures, smells, and shapes that befits the diverse influences in Houston. Layers, seasonality, lush plantings, vivid colors, along with cool shady spaces will be the hallmark of the garden.

Q: What has been the most exciting part of the schematic design process?

A: We have really enjoyed translating the spirit of Houston into garden form; and in particular thinking about how a timeless program like the Botanic Collection stays relevant to all comers in the 21st century. Houston’s climate is a blessing but also a constraint; we have been working really hard to make comfortable shady spaces so that everyone can enjoy the garden year-round. In addition, it has been fascinating to consider issues such as the resiliency of the Bayou City and the long-term growth of a collection.

Q: What impact do you think this project will have on Houston?

A: We hope that it will be a source of pride for Houstonians, as much as the amazing academic institutions, museums, sports teams and cuisine that everyone already knows. We hope that the Houston Botanic Garden becomes one of the most prominent gardens in the world; one that people know as well as Kew or Versailles. We also hope that the Garden has an important local impact, bringing children and adults from the neighborhood and further afield to the Garden to connect with plants and natural beauty.
BotanIQ

Protecting Plants from Freezing Weather

In the Houston area, we are accustomed to the many moods of Mother Nature. Winter can be an especially tricky time for plant lovers. Nothing will wreak as much havoc on our gardens as the wildly disparate temperature changes that turn a mild winter day into a bitterly cold, mid-20s night. So, what can we do to protect our most-valued plants? First, let’s look at what happens during freezing weather.

Some plants, due to their distinct hormones, are naturally more cold-resistant (think woody plants such as oak trees or azaleas); other, more herbaceous plants, such as gingers, bananas, and other tropical or semi-tropical plants are much more susceptible to freeze damage. When temperatures drop below the freezing point for an extended period of time, the water inside plant cells forms ice crystals which cause the cells to rupture. This can cause damage that ranges from minor die back to death of the plant, depending on the length of the freeze and how low temperatures fall. Some plants may only lose foliage and recover, while others die.

So, how to protect your favorite plant? The first thing to do is water around your plants before the freeze. While this may seem counterintuitive, wet ground actually holds heat better than dry ground. Additionally, a well-hydrated plant is better able to withstand cold temperatures. Secondly, cover your plants with something breathable, such as an old sheet, blanket, or commercially-available plant covers. Breathability is the key, as using something such as plastic (non-breathable) will spell certain doom if you are not able to remove it in a timely manner once temperatures rise above freezing. Temperatures can quickly rise under the plastic if your plant is in the sun (a mini-greenhouse-effect) resulting in tissue damage from temperatures that are now too warm! Even if you are unable to remove a breathable fabric for several days after temperatures have moderated there is rarely any harm done since heat is able to dissipate through the fabric.

Sometimes, however, in spite of our best efforts, damage may still occur even when our plants are covered. If this occurs, resist the urge to cut back damaged growth too soon. Even though it may be unsightly, and yes, your neighbors may complain, this cold-damaged growth still provides some insulating properties to the rest of the plant. The best thing to do is wait until spring and then remove damaged growth. If you simply must remove damaged foliage, only remove the bare minimum or subsequent cold snaps will be sure to do further damage.

Winter in Houston can be daunting for plant lovers, but with a little preparation and forethought you can protect your beloved horticultural treasures from Old Man Winter! Happy growing!

- Submitted by Brent Moon
City of Houston Senior Superintendent of Horticulture
The Magical Frostweed

*Verbesina virginica*, also known as Frostweed and White Crownbeard, is a flowering plant of the Asteraceae family. A native to Texas and many Southeastern states, it produces heads of white flowers with dark green leaves in late summer through fall and can grow from 3 to 6 feet tall. Frostweed is an outstanding nectar source for butterflies, especially migrating Monarchs, and thrives well in dappled shade and around woodland areas and streambanks. Native Americans used Frostweed for many medicinal purposes and also enjoyed smoking the plant for special tribal ceremonies.

The unique characteristic of Frostweed is the magic that can occur upon the first hard freeze of the season – supercooled sap builds up pressure between the stem’s secondary xylem core and the outer epidermis causing the stem to split open and exude water which freezes into beautiful miniature ice ribbons. Bob Harms of the University of Texas has termed this natural phenomena as “crystallofolia.” Globally, Frostweed is one of a handful of species known to perform such an intriguing trick. Please note that while there are occasional sightings, this plant is not common in the Houston area, although our friends at the Houston Arboretum also witnessed Frostweed in January! We celebrate the exciting rarity of experiencing such an interesting plant this winter season.

- submitted by Emily Tuttle Wilde

Photo taken in Hunt, TX 1/1/18