

Growing Fertile Minds *and* Communities

Garden visits, educational sessions, and shared experiences motivate participants at the 16th annual National Children & Youth Garden Symposium.

BY DENISE COWIE



that was held in the Greater Philadelphia area from July 24 to 26, expanded that idea into an award-winning series of Take-a-Walk® books as well as radio and television programs that urge young people to “take a minute to be in it.” Since that day a decade ago, she has inspired countless schoolchildren—and numerous adults—to open their eyes and really look at the natural world around them.

LEARNING TO LOOK UP

Kirkland’s campaign to excite children about the natural world was a perfect fit for the 16th annual symposium, “Growing Fertile Minds and Communities,” which focused on promoting programs for children and young people that involve plants, gardening, and nature.

About 330 people attended the symposium, based at the University of Delaware’s Newark campus, says **Stephanie Jutila**, AHS education programs manager. The participants came from 35 states plus the District of Columbia, and included representatives from Barbados, Canada, New Zealand, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Four local hosts also contributed their expertise and gardens to the symposium: Camden Children’s Garden in southern New Jersey; Longwood Gardens in Chester County, Pennsylvania; the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society in Philadelphia; and Winterthur Museum & Country Estate in northern Delaware.

For some in the audience who listened raptly to Kirkland’s tales, attending the symposium for the first time was a bit like “looking up.” Three days of educational sessions and field trips to several out-

ONE DAY, on a trip to her local grocery store in Chester County, Pennsylvania, **Jane Kirkland** looked up and saw a bald eagle soaring high over the parking lot.

A bald eagle—America’s symbol—flying right above her head! She could scarcely believe it.

That glance skyward changed her life, Kirkland told hundreds of horticulturists, educators, and children’s gardening advocates at the American Horticultural Society’s National Children & Youth Garden Symposium in July. Because of that bald eagle, she quit a successful ca-

reer as a writer of computer books and began writing for young people about nature, wildlife, and outdoor adventures.

But it wasn’t because spotting an eagle in the skies above her hometown was so extraordinary—quite the opposite, in fact. “Bald eagles had been flying over that part of Chester County for 20 years,” Kirkland soon discovered. “But I had never seen one before—because I had never looked up.” If one glance could reveal bald eagles overhead, she figured, imagine what regular breaks to observe nature could do.

Kirkland, the opening keynote speaker for the youth gardening symposium

Poster session participants, left to right, David Simpson, Mariana Haque, and Renee Byrd of Clemson University at the 2008 National Children & Youth Garden Symposium.



Above: Jane Kirkland inspires the audience with an animated keynote presentation. **Right:** Author and artist Dar Hosta speaks about cultivating creativity in young people.



standing children's gardens presented possibilities that they might never have considered otherwise.

Among them was **Joelle Morris** of Bethesda, Maryland, who had only a vague knowledge of the American Horticultural Society before she came across a postcard promoting the symposium. Morris, a naturalist at Locust Grove Nature Center in Bethesda, decided to attend—and came away with a new perspective on her job.

"I had all these things that I wanted to try, but just didn't have the courage to get it together. At the symposium, though, everything gelled," she says. "One session

in particular, the Nature-Curriculum Connection, gave me a lot of ideas for how my nature center can support teachers in their curriculum for getting kids outside."

For another first-timer, **Mona Margarita**, the symposium brought validation that the kind of work she does as an educator at Philadelphia's inner-city Awbury Arboretum is not only about fun but is important as well.

Margarita was especially inspired by Kirkland and by New Jersey author **Dar Hosta's** supercharged sessions on creativity, as well as by the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's multi-layered strategies for recruiting teenage interns.



Stuart Nunnery describes his group's plans for creating school gardens in Rhode Island.

"I feel very empowered," Margarita says of her experience. "We will actually be having the children 'look up' in our summer nature program at Awbury and Dar Hosta's book *If I Were a Tree* will be a lesson for our Tree Jubilee."

SHARING IDEAS AND INSPIRATION

All participants sought to share ideas and experiences that have successfully sparked young people's interest in gardens and nature. And share they did. Nearly three dozen educational sessions were presented over two days, in addition to interactive poster displays and daily field trips to

children's gardens.

Here are some of the highlights from these sessions:

■ The Rhode Island Children's Garden Network team outlined its plan that every school and youth organization in Rhode Island will have a garden by 2010. Such gardens—designed and developed by students and the community—are essential to grow the next generation of land stewards, environmentalists, and gardeners, team member **Stuart Nunnery** said, and to provide a link to careers in horticulture, agriculture, and the environment.

■ **Debbie Greene** of the Pilcher Park Nature Center in Joliet, Illinois, related how the center's after-school program celebrates diversity and imparts American history by using the Underground Railroad from Joliet to Canada to teach lessons on gardening and nature. What seeds might these escaped slaves have carried with them? And what foods would make them healthy enough to survive the trip?

■ Philadelphia teacher **Chuck Lafferty** showed videos of some of the country's youngest entrepreneurs—his kindergarten students at Longstreth Elementary School. They held a penny drive to fund a school garden that evolved into an award-winning schoolyard wildlife habitat in inner-city Philadelphia. The students also harvest the seeds and sell them in hand-decorated packs for their Kinder-Garden Seed Company. Lafferty, who acts as CEO, says people shouldn't underestimate what kindergarteners can do.

■ **Dave Francis** shared some of the hands-on activities from his Environmental Science Field Guide. The guide, designed to grab the attention of middle-school students, includes fun activities such as making biodegradable plastic and using Global Positioning System technology. Francis, who's with the Utah State University Extension 4-H program in Ogden, uses garden settings to teach environmental science. "We can't return the earth to a pristine state," he says, "but we can empower kids with the knowledge to make the earth a better place."

■ **Carol Rathmann** talked about a special therapeutic program at the Humane Society's Forget Me Not Farm in Sonoma County, California, where abused children are helped to heal by learning to care for plants and animals.

■ Think gardening is low-tech? Not for the fourth-grade students from Washington Elementary School in Summit, New Jersey. **Natalie Cassidy** and **Cindy Hedin** detailed how the students parlayed a simple salad garden into lessons that satisfied a host of curriculum "technology competencies." The students made a movie of the various stages of their garden, complete with music and voice-overs, then designed and printed invitations to attract an audience to view it.

GARDEN VISITS AND FIELD TRIPS

As a counterpart to the educational sessions, the children's gardens at Longwood, Winterthur, and Camden showcased many different approaches for engaging children's imaginations.

Longwood's new Indoor Children's Garden, for example, shows the influence of classic Italian gardens in child-scale mazes, grottoes, and water features. At Winterthur, the fairy-themed Enchanted Woods promises magical outdoor adventures. And at the four-and-a-half-acre, stand-alone children's garden in Camden, gardens ranging in theme from dinosaurs

Cleveland 2009

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Above: Symposium attendees explore the Faerie Cottage in Winterthur's Enchanted Woods. Right: The living sculpture display at Longwood Gardens was part of a pre-symposium workshop.

to "Three Sisters" vegetable plots offer urban youngsters a place to play and learn.

Whatever the approach, though, children's gardens are becoming more popular than ever.

"Children's gardens are exploding now," says **Jane Taylor**, whose 4-H Children's Garden in East Lansing, Michigan, was on the vanguard of the children's gardening movement. "Pick up a newspaper any day of the week, and you'll read about a school starting a garden. Teachers are realizing this is how they can teach any number of subjects, and nutritionists are delighted."

The designer of Winterthur's Enchanted Woods agrees. "If public gardens don't have a children's garden now, they're planning one," says **W. Gary Smith**, who participated in a panel discussion about design held on a field trip to Longwood. And because of this trend, children's gardens are now on the cutting edge of garden design, adds **Tres Fromme** of Mesa Design Group



in Dallas, Texas, who served as lead designer for Longwood's indoor garden.

In addition to the garden visits during the event, a pre-symposium workshop provided the opportunity to help build a living sculpture at Longwood Gardens. Participants molded soil and covered it with sod to create three large interlocking circles around three weeping redbud trees. **Marcia Eames-Sheavly**, a senior Extension associate at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, who led the workshop, notes that creating living sculpture is a particularly effective activity for engaging high-school-aged youth, a group that children's gardens often struggle to reach. Living sculptures can be any shape that might grab teens' attention, for example sofas and cows, which Eames-Sheavly has

helped create as part of Cornell's Garden Based Learning Program.

Sod sofas sound like a great idea to **Sandy Livermore**, president of the yet-to-open Bookworm Garden in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Since this stand-alone garden is based on 74 works of children's literature, Livermore says, "we need a couple of those for kids to sit on and read our books."

CREATING CONNECTIONS

But the Symposium wasn't only about workshops and educational sessions. It was also about relaxing and socializing during an ice cream social at Winterthur, enjoying a ride on the carousel horses at Camden, and dining in the magnificent conservatory at Longwood.

"My favorite memory is sitting in the conservatory at Longwood Gardens with like-minded people," says Joelle Morris. "I learned a lot from them."



Norm Lownds of Michigan State University comes out of his shell at the Dinosaur Garden at Camden Children's Garden.

Small wonder, then, that when the 16th annual symposium concluded with singer/songwriter **Erica Wheeler's** concert of sometimes-funny, sometimes-poignant songs about our connection to the environment, members of the enthusiastic audience lent their voices to the rousing chorus:

"Inch by inch, row by row,
Gonna make this garden grow.
All I need is a rake and a hoe
And a piece of fertile ground..."

Denise Cowie is a former garden columnist for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

PANEL DISCUSSION FOCUSES ON ART IN BLOOM



During a panel discussion on "Garden-Based Education: The Philadelphia Story" at the symposium, Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) staff members shared their experiences with a traffic-stopping garden built by seventh-grader students of St. Francis Xavier School in Philadelphia. It's a living work of art—an Art Garden inspired by famous artists whose work hangs in the Museum of Art down the street. Under the guidance of teachers **Terri O'Brien** and **Patty Carr**, and religion coordinator **Brendan Petersen**, the students visited the museum to see the paintings, then planted beds of sunflowers for Vincent van Gogh, poppies for Georgia O'Keefe, and irises for van Gogh and Claude Monet.

They mounted colorful frames on the fence surrounding the garden—so passersby could view their floral art as though it were in a gallery—along with their poems, essays, and illustrations. Their teachers used the garden for lessons on art, literature, botany, and other sciences.



"Framed" poppies, top, grow in an Art Garden created by students at St. Francis Xavier School, above.

The project grew out of the students' participation in the PHS's Green City Youth program, which involves young people in schools all over Philadelphia in creating green spaces to improve their communities. "This program is a dream come true," says **Larry Stier**, a former teacher who now heads up the greening initiative for PHS.

Launched in 2005, Green City Youth led to the creation last year of Green City Teachers, which shows Philadelphia-area educators how to build gardens as well as how to incorporate horticulture and environmental education into their curricula.

At St. Francis Xavier, participation in the project also showed the students the meaning of community: While school is closed for the summer, older volunteers from the neighborhood are keeping the Art Garden alive by watering and weeding.

—D.C.