

Postscript (the future and identity of gardens), Peter White:

I cannot resist a short time capsule to the future. The role of botanical gardens has been changing, as the world around gardens has been changing as well. There are pitfalls and dangers in this and I wanted to share my thoughts on the broader issue of garden futures. In short, gardens run the risk of being too narrow, too elitist, not diverse enough with regard to connecting to diverse human cultures and backgrounds, and not focused on key social and environmental priorities. Gardens run the risk of swimming against the tide of social and environmental change and failing to see the critical positive role they could play.

While I will write below that our Garden has done a super job of positioning itself with regard to these larger issues, we too have improvements to make.

Gardens and ecosystems. The word “garden” itself and the history of botanical gardens can impose limits. Once Holden Thorp criticized the UNC homepage as being too much about azaleas. In essence, he was complaining that that visible beauty and serenity of the campus were not as important as the university’s deeper intellectual work and purposes. The word “garden”, in that light, can have the connotation of the icing on the cake rather than the cake itself—something fanciful and designed for beauty, but only affordable if the main work generates sufficient funds. The parts of our Garden that are more cake than icing I have called, in presentations, the “unseen garden”, the part that a casual visitor might not see on a first visit, such things as the conservation programs, restoration of Fort Bragg ecology, the UNC Herbarium, 1100 acres of land, diverse educational catalog, work in health care and hospitals. A recent NY Times article made this case (“Not just about flowers anymore...”) and noted the increasing role of gardens in such areas as community gardens, horticultural therapy, and conservation programs. I have sometimes wondered whether the Garden need a subtitle, the way the change in the name of the Morehead Planetarium to add “and Science Center” made the case for that institution. What would that additional title or subtitle be? It would convey the sense of the environmental center we’ve become and something about the North Carolina ecosphere (making the connection between gardens and nature, plants and animals, and people and the environment explicit). Gardens can be the best institutions to connect people and their environment in broad ways, not just for the botanist and horticultural specialist.

No zoo is without plants (some call themselves zoological gardens) and no garden is without birds and butterflies and other animals. Some plant lovers complain of “plant blindness” since plants are so fundamental (Ritchie Bell once said that “plants aren’t important unless you want to breathe, eat, take medicine, wear clothes, build houses...”) but are often just assumed to be part of the backdrop. To me “plant blindness” preaches to the choir, while also attempting to sell a message through negativity (the person you are talking to is accused of being blind and perhaps is to blame for being at fault). The wider and more inclusive and positive message is that plants are the foundation of all life and vital to all animals (and people). All things connected means that the ecosystem becomes the relevant image.

Left brain, right brain. Gardens must reflect that knowledge and experience are equally important—that a great garden is about science, expertise, and scientific names, but it is also for beauty, enjoyment, respite, inspiration. We expect botanical gardens, certainly university gardens, to be scientific, but we also expect them to be beautiful. Our sculpture show, art gallery, and art classes show the artistic side of gardens and a bench sitting along a flowing and shaded stream shows our connection to experiences and emotions. I was amazed how the Garden filled up with visitors on and after 9/11.

On a much smaller scale, I glanced out my window and saw Patti Thorp walking, then sitting, and walking again with a friend the day Holden resigned. Children's environmental education, likewise, must include both the gain of knowledge and provision of direct experience. Gardens should be about both the right and left sides of the human brain.

Botanical gardens are science-based gardens. Science remains the fundamental base of a botanical garden—and gardens can inherit a key social function by protecting and extending the expertise that universities are discarding: keeping alive natural history data and knowledge, even just simple plant identification skills. With the UNC Herbarium, added in 2001, we are major national center in an important diverse part of the plant kingdom. University botanical gardens, while they have a tremendous and ready-made audience, talent pool, and loyal support, as well as an important opportunity to put students into learning and research experiences outside the lecture hall, cannot drift too far from the needs of their parent institutions. Science is not just confined to horticulture, botany, and conservation it can also be about such topics as the effectiveness of environmental education, the use of gardening in physical therapy, or the psychological effects of gardens and nature.

Changes in social context. Historically, botanical gardens were sometimes the creation of an elite that had power (including, at the global scale, colonial powers seeking natural resources, including in the form of horticultural and medicinal plants), money (to buy plants, pay for water, tools, fuel), unequal access to specialized knowledge, and either the leisure time to garden or the resources to pay for help. When I meet with younger folks, including those in my classes and UNC environmental groups (admittedly not a random sample), I sense their interest in the environment broadly considered, sustainability issues, and organic gardening. For several decades, women and men have been becoming more similar in the need to be wage-earners, by choice and necessity. This too represents a change for gardens. For instance, garden clubs were based on the time and enthusiasm of women who did not work outside the home. Many garden clubs are worried about their survival as their memberships age and as they fail to attract a younger generation. The narrow context of fine horticulture in the US often means the audience is in upper economic classes and low in cultural and ethnic diversity. Such programs as the Carolina Campus Community Garden and K12 education programs fulfill our aspiration for inclusion of the diversity of human backgrounds, economic status, and cultures.

Changes in environmental context. The environment is changing. Gardeners have thought of themselves as inherently “green” or pro-environment and yet gardeners often use toxic chemicals, fertilizers, unsustainable watering, fossil fuel using equipment, and plant and spread invasive plants and plant diseases that they carry. If there is one lasting accomplishment of the North Carolina Botanical Garden is that it has defined and put into practice a new contractual relationship between gardens and the environment, whether we describe this from the bottom up as a summary of our programs or describe it through Bill McDonough’s formulation that all human endeavors should be discussed under five headings: **Earth** (the use of non-toxic, recycled, reused and sustainably produced materials), **Air** (support air quality indoors and out), **Fire** (renewable energy sources), **Water** (the life blood of human society and gardens, to be gotten sustainably), and **Spirit** (for the spirit of all living things—garden visitors, volunteers, staff, as well as birds, butterflies, worms, fungi, nematodes...). Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit have become a mantra at the Garden. Let us celebrate what we have created here: a Garden that is exemplary of all the right ways these institutions need to be in order to meet the important challenges ahead. I am so happy that we have been able to position this garden in this way and become a beacon within the large world of botanical gardens for this achievement.