

American Public Gardens Association Annual Conference

Minneapolis/St Paul June 2015



Merlin Trust Report

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American Public Gardens Association Annual Conference 2015
'Watering Our Roots to Grow Our Communities'

Introduction

Of a public garden, author Dr. Donald Rakow states it should strive to be "a mission based institution that maintains collections of plants for the purpose of education, conservation and science".

This was the common theme running through the programme of talks, seminars and tours at the American Public Gardens annual conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota in June of this year. I attended the conference to learn more about public garden development in the U.S and to find inspiration, especially regarding community engagement within gardens.

Conference

Before the official start of the conference I joined a tour for a series of visits to vegetation reserves outside Minneapolis. The Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, the Schaeffer Prairie reserve and two wetland reserves, Spring Peeper Meadow and Seminary Fen, one of the State-managed sites. It was great to see such well-preserved and maintained conservation areas just a few miles outside of Minneapolis. The day before the official start of the conference I joined a tour group for a series of visits to green sites outside Minneapolis.



Firstly we visited the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, just a few kilometres outside Minneapolis. Luckily the showy lady slipper orchid, *Cyripedium reginae* (See photo on left) Minnesota's state flower, was in bloom, glowing palely in the undergrowth on that grey, rainy day. Next we visited the Schaeffer Prairie reserve where *Phlox* sp. and *Tradescantia* sp. were flowering. This is a unique small reserve, adjacent to farmland and full of many species of prairie plants.

Figure 1: *Cyripedium reginae* at Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden.



Figure 2: Spring Peeper Meadow

Spring Peeper Meadow was our third destination. A shallow wetlands reserve created by spring rains. The manager of the wetlands explained that they spot spray invasive weeds to preserve the sedge meadow flora such as *Asclepias tuberosa*, *Silene* sp., *Vitis* sp., *Iris* sp.

Seminary Fen contains one of the rarest types of wetland in the United States, a calcareous fen. Located in the cities of Chanhassen and Chaska in the Minnesota River Valley, this expansive wetland site also includes a trout stream, important wildlife, eight species of state-listed rare

plants including sedge and lady slipper species. Calcareous fens are characterised by a substrate of non-acidic peat and are dependent on a constant supply of cold, oxygen-poor groundwater. The soils are almost always saturated and the substrate is springy or quaking underfoot.

The first evening of the conference presented the 'International Sessions' where curators, horticulturists, botanists and directors from all over the world giving short presentations about their current projects or interests. Botanist Ori Fragman-Sapir from Jerusalem Botanic Garden showed photographs of the fantastic spring blooms in the desert around Jerusalem earlier in the year. Ryan Guillou, Nursery Manager at Royal Botanic Garden of Jordan explained his plans for the future of the propagation programme there. Chicago Botanic Garden's vice president Patsy Benveniste spoke about their award-winning education and community programmes, the Science Career Continuum which delivers science learning, mentorship and research opportunities for underserved Black and Latino youth from Chicago Public Schools. They also run a programme called 'Windy City Farm' for aspiring entrepreneurial growers by supporting them with subsidised use of land and training.

Of the talks, one of the best was from the education, marketing and interpretation team from Pennsylvania's world-renown Longwood Gardens. They presented a lecture entitled 'Connecting with Nature - engaging visitors through interpretive exhibits' about the development of their historic Meadow site and the interpretation. The 86 acre meadow was opened 1 year ago. Introducing 1,100 trees and shrubs to the surrounding woodland and 100,000 native plants to the meadow, it was a project on a very large scale. They have over 260 species of plants in the meadow and woodland, two thirds of which are native. They remained sensitive to the topography, accessibility by paths and existing property on the site, emphasizing their commitment to sustainability while sharing stories about the people, animals and plants of the area. The muted interpretation is contained in learning pavilions, specially designed to work in harmony with the environment, using natural materials, embossed text and botanical reliefs to engage visitors.



Figure 3: Longwood Garden meadow, Pennsylvania, 2014

Another session, 'Growing and nurturing a plant conservation programme, from roots to shoots' was a fascinating series of short presentations from small to large botanical institutions; Atlanta Botanic Garden and Montgomery Botanical Center to name two. Methods and principles for building and expanding programmes were discussed and debated. There seemed to be a common

emphasis on the importance of local community involvement in conservation. Using long-term local volunteers to help with vegetation surveying, observation and research achieved good results.

The most thought provoking and resonating talk during the week was by Paul Cady a recent Masters graduate from University of Georgia. Paul spoke of points from his thesis about organisational memory within public gardens. He described a need for the sharing of horticultural knowledge via mentoring, keeping written, oral and video records. His research revealed that 72% of gardeners in public gardens in the U.S work for 10 years or more within one garden, accumulating a huge amount of important knowledge. The role that management could play in ensuring that information about a garden is retained for future generations is key. Cultivating trust through good communication, respect and being generous with time. He suggests that rewarding employees for record keeping and setting targets could be a good way to encourage knowledge sharing. The talk highlighted the importance of including gardeners in Landscape Management plans and using their expertise and insight to devise a strategy that they can imagine working towards and maintaining in the long term.

Tours

During the week there were optional tours each day (I chose to attend as many as possible); green public spaces in the city, extraordinary private gardens in the suburbs, Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, Como Park Zoo and Marjorie McNeely Conservatory.

The latter was of particular interest to me as I work at Chester Zoo as a Horticulturist. Como Park Zoo has a strong emphasis on plants, green with award-winning gardens, mature trees and naturalistic enclosures. The animals have trees and shrubs within and surrounding their enclosures, giving them a sense of seclusion and areas to hide, essential for their well-being. The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory at the entrance to the Zoo is made up of nine gardens, one house being a large aviary, another an impressive fern house, but the highlight was the Sunken Garden with its formal design and striking seasonal floral display. I met with a few of the horticulturists and managers who were stationed in their areas. They showed real dedication to their work and spoke passionately about horticulture and the plans for the conservatories and outdoor areas.



Figure 4: Lion enclosure, Como Park Zoo



Figure 5: Sunken Garden, Como Park Zoo

The 'Keeping Green in the Skyline' tour around the city was interesting. We visited Lyndale Park in the east of the city where they had an impressive collection of two thousand cultivated roses and beds planted in the style of paintings such as Vincent Van Gogh's 'Wheatfield with crows'. The Peace garden was beautiful, designed in the Japanese traditional style, creating a movingly atmospheric space. We also visited Mill Ruins Park, a historic site next to the Mississippi river. The site shows remnants of the old mill where the milling industry began in Minneapolis in the 19th

Century. They are an impressive sight, large millstones and crumbling foundations in evidence. The park is situated next to St. Anthony Falls on the Mississippi. They have plans to develop wildflower areas within the ruins.

Minnesota Landscape Arboretum is a series of gardens with a very high standard of horticulture and sense of place. The Arboretum was founded in 1958 by the Lake Minnetonka Garden Club, University of Minnesota and other community supporters, but its roots reach back to 1908 when the University of Minnesota Horticultural Research Center began developing cold-hardy apple varieties on the site. We spent an evening exploring the gardens, and of particular interest were the wildflower garden and the Japanese garden.



Figure 6: Lego monarch butterfly, Minnesota Landscape Arboretum

Both gardens had distinct atmospheres, one naturalistic and unkempt, the other carefully designed and maintained. There were giant Lego sculptures dotted around the Arboretum, a monarch butterfly on a milkweed flower in a herbaceous border, a dragonfly hovering over a pond. This exhibition has been a great success, drawing new visitors to the gardens. The Arboretum was exceptionally well maintained and a good collection of plants in well designed gardens. The interpretative was very good, with careful thought put into the writing and aesthetics.

Plenary Talks

During the week, eminent people in horticulture gave lunchtime speeches, notably president of the American Alliance of Museums, Ford Bell, and president emeritus of the Missouri Botanical Garden, Dr. Peter Raven. Ford Bell spoke about the importance of regarding public gardens within the museum arena. He has been campaigning for greater exposure for museums with the public, the media and government officials at all levels. Dr. Peter Raven reflected on past trends in public horticulture, where he saw it presently, and where he saw it heading in the future. It was an inspiring speech by an eminent plant scientist and champion of plant conservation and education.

Conclusion

The conference experience provided plenty of ideas and inspiration regarding my interests in public engagement within gardens. Issues such as how to interpret displays, increase interest in plant conservation, and collaborate with local communities emphasise this aim. Discussions during the conference raised a big question about why further education in the fields of plant science and horticulture among young people is decreasing. Hearing about programmes such as the Science Career Continuum at Chicago Botanic Garden, was illuminating and heartening. These are all matters that I will continue to consider and actively work towards improving throughout my career.

Visiting the private and public gardens of Minneapolis, seeing green spaces with different styles and purposes has provided inspiration for planting designs that I would like to create at Chester Zoo. The information gathered during the presentation by the Longwood Garden team will have a

lasting impact on how I will consider develop existing natural areas as a senior horticulturist in the future.

At the conference I met a large number of people from all over the world with the common goal to make horticulture more accessible and engaging for the wider public. I hope to nurture the contacts that I have made and continue the conversations at future conferences and meetings.

I would like to thank the Merlin Trust for supporting this trip that has developed and encouraged my professionalism and enthusiasm for horticulture.

Budget breakdown

Air fare £720
Land Transport (Buses/trains UK+U.S) £70.80
Hotel £577
Conference and tours £644
Food £240

Total- £2251.80

References

D.A. Rakow and S.A. Lee. 2011. Public Garden Management. John Wiley and Sons. Hoboken, NJ.

Illustrations

Cover-APGA conference motif.

Photograph on the cover, Figure 1,2,4,5,6 all author's own images.

Figure 3- Ashley Edwards

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