

Reflections on 'The Big Picture'

Micheline Newton¹

Casting aside my umbrella and shaking off my gum boots I left a New Zealand winter with ankle deep water and headed to Pasadena in sunny southern California for the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) conference. Entitled 'The Big Picture', this superb conference held on 24 June 2008 provided the opportunity to network with individuals from public gardens and arboreta around the world.

Whether you were from public or private gardens, a landscaper, or in visitor services the workshops and garden visits provided relevant ideas on how to engage with your community, donors and visitors.

Randy Olsen, award winning film maker and evolutionary biologist, faced a room full of academics and challenged our need to be cerebral and suggested we become more likeable. Initial intakes of breath at the thought of devaluing our horticultural efforts, research and knowledge sharing eventually turned into nods of agreement that we need to engage our visitors. If we are going to successfully create a great visitor experience and convey our messages about conservation, restoration, sustainability or general plant education we need to bring back the 'bling' and put on a show.

The garden is a stage. We act, direct and watch it, all at the same time. Social interaction can allow the public to discover a garden in their own way. In a world where decreased leisure time and low awareness is a constraint we need to study our competitors and identify what it is about our gardens that is different. We need to understand that for most people visiting a garden is a social experience. This doesn't mean we stop plant research and development to entertain people but we need to revisit how we are speaking to our visitors and make the research work

worthwhile through increasing public awareness.

Most of us got into horticulture for the experience, not because we were taught about photosynthesis. Immersing our visitors' senses with the sounds, scents and beauty of gardens is what we need to deliver. Plants have often had a bad rap in the media such as TV or film. Examples of this are triffids or evil cartoon characters based on plants. So how do we make plants sexy? Are we talking about how can we make poison ivy as sexy as Uma Thurman in *Batman and Robin*? Not necessarily, but we can liven up how we present our gardens.

Effective design can create a sense of place for a garden. Innovative use of signage for both direction finding and interpretation is important. Focal points balanced by areas of rest allow people to stop and linger. Innovative design can also create a sense of discovery, surprise and humour and provide new ways of seeing and appreciating plants and the landscape, such as unexpected opportunities and perspectives to see rare plants. Apply the science of stealth education, the "aha, made you learn" experience where visitors have so much fun they don't even realise they are learning something. This can be achieved through garden displays, use of discovery information carts, activity backpacks, activities, demonstrations and audio tours. Glamourising the familiar can provide unique experiences. Canopy walks among the trees and plant displays can connect people with plants and even create a fan base for certain types of plants. The University of Washington Botanic Gardens created an effective colourful display of orchids using alphabetical letters as props interspersed with the plants. Each letter was connected to a name or word that represented orchids. Atlanta Botanical Garden's 'Big Bugs

and Killer Plants' exhibition (April to Oct 2007) presented large wooden sculpted bugs in the garden to demonstrate insect roles in pollination and predation in a fun way (Fig. 1). During this exhibition they also showcased their world renowned carnivorous plant collection.



Fig. 1 Praying Mantis sculpture, Atlanta Botanical Gardens 'Big Bugs & Killer Plants' exhibition 2007.

More and more gardens are using events to achieve various outcomes. They can increase visitor numbers, provide a cheap form of advertising, attract new visitor markets and create a sense of urgency to visit. Regular exhibitions and events also lead to repeat visitation which in turn can lead to a sense of loyalty and pride in local visitors and more opportunities to obtain support for the gardens.

Chicago Botanic Garden is another American public garden with a very successful programme of events, activities and educational classes year round which appeal to a wide audience of visitors. Smaller gardens can also create or be part of an event that draws visitors – a successful New Zealand example is the Taranaki Rhododendron and Garden Festival. Aligning these events with a botanical theme will assist in the delivery of key messages from the gardens. Success with our own 'Stoneleigh Sculpture in the Gardens' exhibition (Nov 2007 to Jan 2008) at Auckland Botanic

¹ Auckland Regional Botanic Gardens, 102 Hill Road, Manurewa, Auckland; Micheline.Newton@arc.govt.nz

Gardens (Fig. 2, 3) certainly supports this move to engage visitors and is borne out by recent visitor research.



Fig. 2 Kuri Topiary by Steve Woodward, Auckland Botanic Gardens 'Stoneleigh Sculpture in the Gardens' exhibition (2007/2008).



Fig. 3 Porehu & Haeata by Paul Dibble, Auckland Botanic Gardens 'Stoneleigh Sculpture in the Gardens' exhibition (2007/2008).

The value of membership was another strong message from 'The Big Picture' conference. Larger gardens with successful event and community education programmes delivered these through a structured membership team either run by the Public Garden or through a support association such as the Friends of the Gardens. Where they were run by the gardens, the financial costs of these programmes were supported by revenue from membership.

Garden membership provides opportunities to educate a captive audience, gain public funding, provide cash flow, increase visitation and public issue support and open the garden to corporate marketing and potential sponsorships. Gardens with successful membership programmes were those where the objectives of the membership were clear and the mission was aligned with that of the garden they were supporting. A strong message was to ensure that key questions are asked to define the aim of membership. Questions

should include, for example: how will the membership programme support the garden's vision; what is the purpose of having members; do the tangible benefits correspond to fees being asked; can a member service be provided with a communication programme and are the resources available to run the programme long term? If these questions cannot be clearly answered then implementing a membership programme is not the right decision.

The garden visits offered during and pre-conference were excellent. The Desert Garden (Fig. 4) at Huntington Botanical Gardens left me lost for words. Their ten-acre conservation collection of cacti and other succulents from around the world was stunning. The conservation aspects of this garden provide staff with an important mission and challenge. A special garden volunteer programme collects detailed flower and fruiting data for scientific and horticultural purposes.



Fig. 4 Desert Garden, Huntington Botanical Gardens.

February 2008 saw the opening of the Chinese Garden at Huntington (Fig. 5). It reflects the traditional scholar gardens of Suzhou featuring a 1.5 acre lake, pavilions, a tea house, tea shop and five stone bridges. The standard of work was excellent and this garden will mature into something quite splendid.



Fig. 5 Chinese Garden, Huntington Botanical Gardens.

As a first time attendee to the APGA I would recommend anyone involved with public gardens to attend future conferences if the opportunity arises. The ability to network with such a diverse group of people and gain from the collective experience they offer is tremendous.

In summary, the key areas of learning are that we can benefit greatly through engaging more effectively with our visitors and by creating a sense of place. This can be achieved through interpretative signage, audio, interactive activities and workshops. Events are an effective tool to create a reason for visitors to come and they can also increase the diversity of audience who visit. For some gardens membership can offer a source of extra income plus the potential to access volunteers. To be effective, the strategy behind membership needs to be clearly aligned with the garden's mission.

The next conference is in St. Louis, Missouri 23–27 June 2009 (www.publicgardens.org). The conference will be 'Celebrating the Global Garden' and will focus on how we operate in an ever-changing environment.

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Mich is the Visitor Services Manager of the Auckland Botanic Gardens, and her biography is at www.aucklandbotanicgardens.co.nz/subsites/botanicgardens/about-us/meet-the-curators/mich-newton.cfm