

An American journey: My experiences as a Longwood Fellow

Barbara Wheeler¹

Careers. Like a flight of steps, one starts at a point on the stairwell and moves to a point of comfort or ambition. For me, I started at the base of the stairs and basically put one foot in front of the other. Opportunity arose as I progressed and I took those, no matter the discomfort I may have felt at the time by taking opportunity outside of my comfort zone. I reached a point of relative success, 28 years in, and while still loving my work I found that there was something missing. I didn't know what it was, couldn't put my finger on it, but I knew that there was something I needed to do, and had to work out what it was.

This was my dilemma over a year ago. Now, I write this as I look out the window on an American late fall (Autumn) day, where it is cold, very cold, sleet showers have passed through, leaves have departed the branches on many trees and are still in colour on others (Fig. 1–2). I am at Longwood Gardens and undertaking a 13-month leadership development program, as a Longwood Fellow.



Fig. 1 Early morning light among the trees, Longwood Gardens, November 2019.



Fig. 2 *Taxodium distichum* var. *imbricarium* 'Prairie Sentinel' (pond cypress) showing bronze foliage in late Autumn, Longwood Gardens, November 2019.

Barbara Wheeler has served in the horticulture industry for twenty-nine years. After completing a horticultural apprenticeship at Dunedin Botanic Garden, she gained a place on the 12-month Longwood Gardens International Gardener Program. Returning to New Zealand on completion of the program, she took up a role as a Parks Officer for the Dunedin City Council. Then, in 1998 Barbara again departed New Zealand to undertake further training, completing the two-year Royal Horticultural Society' Wisley Diploma in Horticulture. As part of this course, Barbara had opportunities to assist with installing the RHS garden entry at the Chelsea Flower Show, undertaking a placement at Tresco Abbey Gardens and completing a horticultural study tour of Israel. Next was a one year role as Gardener – second in charge, at Admiralty House in Sydney, Australia (the Sydney residence of the Australian Governor-General) before she headed back to New Zealand to take on a maternity cover role at Dunedin Botanic Garden as plant collection curator of the Rock, Water and Alpine Collections. Following this, Barbara took on the Collections Supervisor role at Dunedin Botanic Garden, overseeing the day to day operational management of the gardens' seven plant collections, where she has been for 18 years. Barbara applied for and was accepted to the prestigious 13-month Longwood Fellows Program and starting in June 2019 took a sabbatical from Dunedin Botanic Garden to complete this program.

History

Longwood Gardens is one of the world's great gardens. Located 30 miles south west of Philadelphia in Pennsylvania and ideally situated between New York City to the north and Washington DC to the south, it is one of the 30 gardens in 30 miles (from Philadelphia) that are part of America's Garden Capital. Over 1,077 acres (436 hectares) of land, Longwood's vision is "to become a world apart, a place accessible to all" and is well known in the USA and around the world for "growing ordinary plants in extraordinary ways".

Longwood Gardens mission connects strongly to the founder, Pierre S. du Pont and all that Longwood does must pass through the lens of this living legacy – "the living legacy of Pierre S. du Pont, inspiring people through excellence in garden design, horticulture, education, and the arts".

Pierre du Pont purchased the land that is now Longwood Gardens in 1906 and began creating it as a place for entertaining his friends and family. A relatively simple vision that started decades of creation by du Pont himself and led to what is seen and built upon today.

Education and the Fellows Program

Another legacy of du Pont is the commitment to horticultural education and instruction, and its plethora of educational opportunities provide options for those at school, to career-based programs and continuing education programs. One of these career-based programs is the Longwood Fellows.

The Longwood Fellows Program is still a young program. It is the new generation of a program that first began back in 1967 when Longwood Gardens partnered with the University of Delaware to form the two-year Longwood Graduate Program with

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graduates receiving a Masters in Ornamental Horticulture. Over the subsequent 19 years the Graduate Program altered twice to become firstly an M.S. in Public Horticulture Administration and latterly an M.S. in Public Horticulture. The Program underwent a major overhaul in 2017 to align with the public horticulture needs of today – that of building leadership capacity.

Education has formed a major part of my horticultural career. Seven years of it in fact, in structured horticultural training programs in New Zealand, the USA and the UK. I've always held a strong view that learning and new experiences go hand in hand. They provide fresh perspectives, a wider scope and, of course, the incalculable value of knowledge you gain from others along the way. Amazingly, these experiences do not need to stop, no matter the stage of your career, which is how I find myself here today.

There are many parts to the Fellows Program and as one progresses, each component builds upon the one before. We are in a cohort of six; all Fellows selected are leaders in their respective fields of public horticulture. It is a deeply immersive 13-month program starting each June with a one month overlap with the previous cohort. This is a time where on-boarding takes place and we had presentations from each department to become fully immersed in the gardens' operations, management and culture.

Thereafter, class work began. Learning augmented with delivering and facilitating presentations to our fellow Fellows helps cement the theoretical component. The subjects covered by leaders within Longwood Gardens as well as leaders brought in externally have been vast and now, six months in, it is dizzying thinking of those that we have covered to date. Leadership theory, finance, cultural perspectives, facilitation, leadership communications and executive presence, media training, action learning, master site planning (Fig. 3) and human resources to name but a few subjects.

Alongside the classes at Longwood, we have also experienced studies at three top universities. The week-long

Strategic Leadership Program at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business was one of the highest calibre courses. As with most things in life, the success of this program was due to the people – the Faculty really are 'top drawer' of the highest quality. Two days at Chicago's Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University saw us delve into Non-Profit Finance and Accounting. Closer by, two days of Negotiation for Success at Georgetown University in Washington DC capped off a trifecta of learning, pushing capabilities and growing.



Fig. 3 Master site planning class, November 2019.

Leadership

Growing. This is both the business we are in as well as the stairwell we are currently on as Fellows. One of the biggest parts of the program is self-reflection, personal growth and understanding and continued development. This in itself can create great leaders, if you are willing to listen, have an open mind and instigate change in yourself. The value in living by the mantra 'feedback is a gift' takes some adjustment but once you are there it is freeing. Daily reflection adds to this and, while I still have some way to go in developing the diligence of daily reflections, I have gained much value from the process to date.

Learning from leaders is inspiring, and the exposure we get to a wide variety of leaders from both public horticulture and the wider non-profit field is incredible. Gaining access to the leaders is one thing but being able to hear from them personally on everything leadership, their journeys and the challenges they have faced gives a seldom-gained viewpoint of leadership. Often you are too busy leading yourself, so this opportunity to be focussed on learning over leading

for 13 months is quite a privilege. We've learnt from leaders at Morris Arboretum, The Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, Barnes Foundation, Chanticleer Garden, Stoneleigh Garden, Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College (Fig. 4) and The Linc (The Lincoln Financial Field). While all have been once in a lifetime experiences, the last on that list provided us an incredible opportunity to meet leaders at the Philadelphia Eagles home ground, The Linc. A special moment revealed while we were there was the opportunity to go into the Eagles dressing room and then exit down the tunnel and onto the field with all the lights and music pumping that the Eagles get each time they play. Quite an experience.

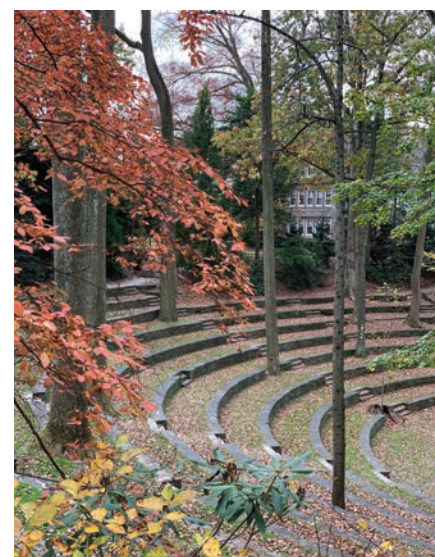


Fig. 4 Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College, Philadelphia.

Much of what I've mentioned thus far is the cohort program, but the Fellows Program also allows for individual growth through a flexible curriculum. This provided me the opportunity to travel to some incredibly diverse gardens to discuss all things leadership – from Denver Botanic Gardens (Fig. 5), The Morton Arboretum, Biltmore Estate, North Carolina Arboretum, University of Georgia State Botanical Garden, Brookgreen Gardens and Middleton Place to name but a few. I'd love to say I got time to explore these gardens in detail but, as the priority is leadership, the plants naturally have to come second so I've had to quickly develop some key techniques of walking, talking and allowing my peripheral vision to pick up on the beauty of the landscape and gardens!



Fig. 5 Denver Botanic Gardens, Colorado.

Project work

A key component of the program is three projects that each Fellow is expected to be involved in. The first is an immersion at Longwood Gardens where you work with a department on a management project. The second is the cohort project, a shared project that all six of the cohort works on together. This project is one that will benefit the wider public horticulture industry, not just in the USA but globally. Look out for this when we release the results of ours at the end of June 2020 – we will present it at the American Public Gardens Association (APGA) conference in Portland, Oregon. Exciting times.

The final project is one which we undertake on field placement. Field placement is one of the opportunities in which we get to put into practice a lot of the learnings on the Program. For me, as I am an international student here, I have some visa requirements that dictate my field placement must be USA-based. No matter, as the USA is festooned with several great gardens that are placement hosts to the Fellows Program. Most here think I am barking mad for selecting my placement site – not because of the garden, but the location has caused raised eyebrows. I head to The Morton Arboretum in Chicago in February to March 2020. I'm excited as The Morton is held in high regard globally and their leadership is inspiring. However, Chicago in February is cold. The winds coming off Lake Michigan are apparently

something else to experience. They put the coastal winter Antarctic-laden breezes of Dunedin, New Zealand, into a different category altogether. There's nothing like an experience in deep cold to consider how tropical Dunedin seems in comparison.

The Five Seasons of Longwood Gardens

I've talked a lot about the leadership program in public horticulture as that is the focus of my time here, but I still get my fill of the plants and I've experienced thus far three of the five seasons of Longwood Gardens.

Seems strange to have five seasons; however, Longwood's five seasons denote the five displays that span the calendar year. I've yet to experience a couple of seasons – 'Orchid Extravaganza' and 'Spring Blooms'. However, the other three seasons I've been immersed in and I take any opportunity to head into the garden to be inspired by the magic that the skilled staff here create (Fig. 6–12). 'Festival of Fountains', 'Autumn's Colors' (which includes the highly anticipated *Chrysanthemum* displays; Fig. 13A–E) and a 'Longwood Christmas' (Fig. 14A–F) are all magical in every way possible and often leave me gasping for superlatives.



Fig. 6 Grass creatively bent at Longwood Gardens to create a patriotic stars and stripes pattern for Independence Day, July 2019 (<https://longwoodgardens.org/blog/2019-07-03/bent-shape>).



Fig. 7 Summer on the Flower Garden Walk at Longwood Gardens, August 2019.

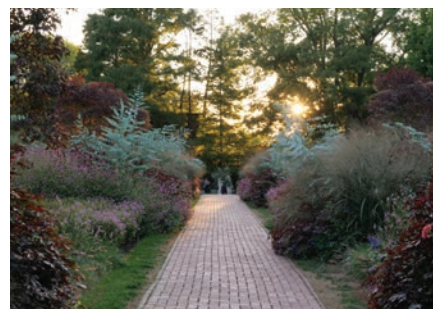


Fig. 8 Late afternoon light on the Flower Garden Walk at Longwood Gardens, October 2019.



Fig. 9 The Chimes Tower at Longwood Gardens, September 2019.



Fig. 10 *Victoria cruziana* (Santa Cruz water lily) growing at Longwood Gardens, September 2019.



Fig. 11 Examples of topiary at Longwood Gardens, October 2019.



Fig. 12 Autumn colour at the large lake at Longwood Gardens, November 2019.

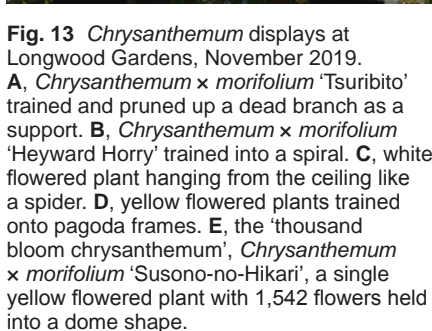
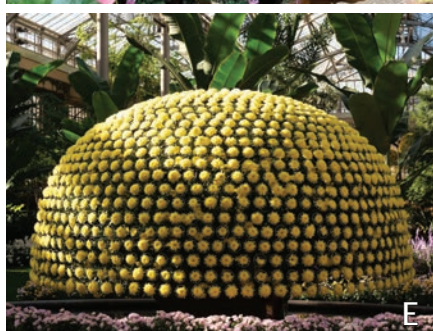
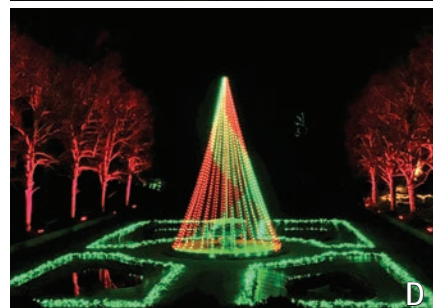


Fig. 13 *Chrysanthemum* displays at Longwood Gardens, November 2019. **A**, *Chrysanthemum* \times *morifolium* 'Tsuribito' trained and pruned up a dead branch as a support. **B**, *Chrysanthemum* \times *morifolium* 'Heyward Horry' trained into a spiral. **C**, white flowered plant hanging from the ceiling like a spider. **D**, yellow flowered plants trained onto pagoda frames. **E**, the 'thousand bloom chrysanthemum', *Chrysanthemum* \times *morifolium* 'Susono-no-Hikari', a single yellow flowered plant with 1,542 flowers held into a dome shape.

The level of horticultural craft on display is exceedingly high. Just when you think the staff has reached a pinnacle, they outdo themselves and you find yourself wondering where creativity will end. The Sogetsu display (Ikebana – the Japanese display of flower arranging, and the largest install of its kind in the USA) as part of the Blooms and Bamboo exhibit was jaw-dropping in its

magnificence and scale (Fig. 15A–C). Chrysanthemum's joined the Sogetsu and were displayed in all manner of shapes, from spider (Fig. 13C) to pagoda (Fig. 13D) to the grandest of them all, the '1,000 bloom chrysanthemum' which this year had a record 1,542 blooms on one single plant (Fig. 13E). A sight to behold.

Fig. 14 'Longwood Christmas' displays, November 2019. **A–B**, giant Christmas decorations arranged in the conservatory. **C–F**, outdoor light displays.



Fig. 15A–C The Sogetsu display as part of the Blooms and Bamboo exhibit in the conservatory, Longwood Gardens, November 2019.

The Festival of Fountains held through summer was a spectacle of a magnitude which is difficult to describe. The normal fountain display during the day is pretty special (Fig. 16) but, once darkness descends, the magic happens. Fountains projecting jets of water in time with music and with lighting of all colours adding to the display (Fig. 17) makes the old Star Fountain of Dunedin look tame by comparison. On six evenings of the year, fireworks are added in to create a visual and sound spectacular that is arguably the finest in the world. My first fireworks show was *Night at the Movies* where all music was from movie soundtracks. To see fountains, lights, flames dancing on top of jets of water, to hear the music and then see and

hear fireworks at close range is an assault on the senses of the greatest proportion. Guests depart saying “How did they do that? It’s like magic”. Quite simply much of Longwood Gardens is pure magic and you just have to give in to the wonder of it all.



Fig. 16 Fountains above an avenue of *Tilia cordata* ‘Greenspire’ (littleleaf linden), Longwood Gardens, July 2019.



Fig. 17 Festival of Fountains, held May to September 2019, Longwood Gardens.

So, when people ask me “why America?” which I am often asked by people outside of the USA, Longwood Gardens is the reason why. There are gardens throughout the world that are standouts for any professional horticulturist to work at – Longwood is one of those and to be part of the magic of Longwood is a privilege that is once in a lifetime (uh, well, twice for me as I undertook the Longwood Gardens International Gardener Program in 1994–1995!).

A career of education

I’m on the Fellows Program because I see huge value in education and stepping outside your comfort zone to progress both professionally and personally. I’ve valued all the educational opportunities I’ve taken and am committed to providing training programs and career guidance wherever I work. The big picture is to have some real influence at a higher level on horticultural training in New Zealand from grass roots (excuse the pun!) to leadership. I often reflect back on my start in horticulture, just wanting to work outside and in nature, and a chance was provided by way of an

apprenticeship. Nearly 30 years later, it is my turn to provide opportunities to ensure the continued success of our public gardens globally.

Big things come from small beginnings and opportunities. This is something else I often reflect upon. Could the people who gave me my first start have fully comprehended where I would end up? They possibly had an inkling of my potential but, in reality, unrealized potential is all around us. They took a chance based on what they saw in me, and a chance is all one needs. That first open door unlocks the next, and then the next. Even a closed door is a positive challenge as there is always a way to unlock it with enough commitment and passion.

The real responsibility on us all is to realise potential in others – to guide and encourage them, be patient, and create a safe, positive and open learning environment. We must also understand that we ourselves have more potential than we often realise or admit. Committing to stepping into the unknown, pushing beyond our comfort zones and where we believe we are capable should be something all of us aspire to each and every day.

So, back to those stairs, which I feel I’m leaping up several at a time, gazelle-like at the moment. To be honest, the Fellows Program has pushed me greatly and managing workloads and the amount of information being taught to us daily is adding to the complexity of it all. However, without challenge you are stagnant. Without change a garden is stagnant. The excitement for me is the future, when I return to New Zealand to add value with all I’ve learned, with leadership front and centre in my mind and in my vision for what I want to give back to the horticulture industry – and with a global view of stewardship of our public spaces and the amazing people that work within them.

Websites (accessed November 2019)

Longwood Gardens: History: <https://longwoodgardens.org/history>
Longwood Gardens: About: <https://longwoodgardens.org/about>
Longwood Gardens: Education: <https://longwoodgardens.org/about/education>
Longwood Gardens: Longwood Fellows Program: <https://longwoodgardens.org/education/longwood-fellows-program>