(R)evolution: Planning for Ecological Change and Resiliency at a Public Garden
DESCRIPTION

In the face of increased environmental pressures, landscape architects and clients have the ability to influence our environment’s capacity for resiliency and provide ecosystem services. By examining conservation ethics and the planning process of a public garden, this session explores transformative endeavors which strive to unite conservation, horticulture and education.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• Understand the role landscape architects and clients can play in the ecological health and resiliency of our ecoregions

• Explore the ethical considerations of landscape architecture interventions at the interface of conservation biology and increased urbanization, including global climate change and the northern migration of plants

• Review best practices for ecoregion-specific master planning and to understand the adaptive capacity of a site

• Discover the importance of the human dimension of ecological restoration and conservation and how to foster positive relationships between people and their environment

• Explore the possibilities of integrating sustainability standards in a public garden’s operations and maintenance strategies

to conserve and promote the region’s native plants to ensure healthy, biologically diverse landscapes.
PRESENTATION OUTLINE

I. The History and Mission of New England Wild Flower Society
   A. History of the institution—the nation’s oldest plant conservation organization, working in all six New England states
   B. History of the site, Garden in the Woods—Started by landscape architect Will Curtis in 1931 as his personal garden showcasing native plants in naturalistic displays on a stunning site
   C. Mission statement—"to conserve and promote the region’s native plants to ensure healthy, biologically diverse landscapes"—and the vision for the Garden

II. Project Background: The role of Garden in the Woods as an educational canvas and embodiment of a conservation mission in planning for the future
   A. Identify the financial, social, operational and conservation challenges associated with a well-established public garden who is facing an aging infrastructure, ecological degradation and climate-driven uncertainty
   B. Discuss how the Garden plans to meet those challenges and the meaning of resiliency—ecological, financial and operational
   C. Present the quest for a philosophical and physical master plan that addresses the conservation and operational challenges of the site and ecoregion and that bridges the divide between conservation and horticulture

III. The Ingredients of a Master Plan in an Age of Uncertainty
   A. Guiding Principles—"with position in the landscape comes responsibility"
   B. Conceptual strategies for managing resilience and the unique position of the Society (“A regional conservation organization that happens to own a botanic garden”)
   C. Embedding resiliency and maintaining integrity—the master plan

IV. A Call for Action: Challenges for the future of public gardens, conservation organizations and landscape architecture
   A. Public gardens’ role as “modern-day arks”
   B. The role of native plants in urban, suburban and rural contexts—it’s all about health, safety and welfare
   C. Ecoregion-specific analysis and planning tools
   D. Demanding appropriate plant ecotypes, especially in restoration projects
   E. The ethics of assisted migration of plant ecotypes
Debbi Edelstein
Executive Director, New England Wild Flower Society

Debbi Edelstein is the Executive Director of New England Wild Flower Society, the nation’s oldest plant conservation organization. She led the goal-setting process for the master plan for Garden in the Woods and chairs the planning committee. Previously, she served as a Vice President of National Audubon Society and Executive Director of Audubon Washington; was a senior manager at the Northeast’s regional air quality association; led the nonprofit partner’s role in creating a 14,000-acre bioreserve in southeastern Massachusetts; and served as Executive Director of a watershed association. She holds a master’s degree in environmental policy and planning from MIT.

Mark Richardson
Director of Horticulture, New England Wild Flower Society

Mark Richardson is Director of Horticulture for the New England Wild Flower Society, where he oversees the Society’s botanical garden, Garden in the Woods, and its native plant nursery operation, Nasami Farm. He studied ornamental horticulture at University of Rhode Island while helping to run a mid-size ornamental plant nursery before finding his true passion in public horticulture. Mr. Richardson led undergraduate programs at Longwood Gardens, where he directed a curriculum overhaul of the Professional Gardener Program, and adult education at Brookside Gardens. He holds a master’s degree from the University of Delaware’s Longwood Graduate Program.

José Almiñana, FASLA, LEED AP
Principal, Andropogon Associates

José Almiñana is a principal at Andropogon Associates and has over 30 years of experience with the firm. Trained as both a landscape architect and architect, his collaborative work strives to achieve the highest possible performance with the least amount of resources. For SITES, he has served as a member of the Steering Committee and now serves on the Technical Core Committee for the Pilot Project Phase. José is a visiting lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania School Of Design, Drexel University and Philadelphia University. José currently serves on the City of Philadelphia Art Commission.

Emily McCoy, RLA, ASLA
Director of Integrative Research, Andropogon Associates

Emily McCoy, RLA, ASLA is the Director of Integrative Research at Andropogon Associates and an adjunct professor in Temple University’s MLA program, which focuses on ecological landscape restoration. In both roles, Ms. McCoy strives to contribute to the knowledge base of landscape architecture by exploring the interplay between professional practice and scholarship. Emily’s recent projects include Panther Hollow Watershed Restoration, Garden-in-the-Woods Master Plan, USCG Headquarters and UPenn Shoemaker Green. Emily holds an MLA with a concentration in natural resource management from NCSU; an B.S. in Ecology from Appalachian State University; and has valuable professional experience as a horticulturist and researcher.
The Ever-Changing Landscape
Past is Prologue: The Evolution of a Garden

The Gardener as Artist

Will Curtis and his partner Dick Stiles imbued Garden in the Woods with their spirit of experimentation, instinct for naturalistic garden design, and a sense of wonder that is clear some 82 years after the first shovel hit the earth. Curtis was an artist who, according to Stiles, never worked from a plan, “for it was all in that brain that could envision and feel and know just how it should be.” Although they often appear effortless, naturalistic gardens are the most challenging to envision and among the most challenging to maintain. How can one improve or perfect that which took eons for nature to create? How does one choose which trees to fell in a forest to create the perfect amount of dappled light for a garden of spring ephemerals? Where is the best place to site a path to make it seem like a naturally occurring feature of a garden? Curtis’s mastery of this art form, developed over a lifetime of gardening, is apparent throughout Garden in the Woods.

For longtime members of the Society, the history of Garden in the Woods is familiar. But what we don’t often consider is that Curtis, like most gardeners, never truly “finished” his garden but simply ran out of time to undertake whatever next steps he envisioned. Given more active years, he may have built more habitat garden displays, expanded into the “natural areas” serving as buffers, or even torn out and replanted entire garden sections. No one can say how Curtis’s garden might have evolved, but when I consider his passion, I realize that I have never visited a “finished” garden, private or public, because by their very nature, gardens are dynamic and constantly evolving. They change from season to season, month to month, and often hour.
to hour; they change by design and by natural intervention.

As an artist whose medium was plants, Curtis was aware of the fragility of his creations and, like all gardeners, embraced—eagerly or reluctantly—the inevitability of change. The devastation wrought by the 1938 hurricane nearly convinced him to abandon his dream. Garden in the Woods lost nearly three hundred large trees. That kind of devastation is not unlike the loss of the one perfect tree over a small shade garden in a residential neighborhood. The effect is the same on the gardener—shock, sadness, and dismay at the prospect of losing a lifetime of work, followed by excitement at the possibility of renewal in newfound sunlight. Curtis knew that his garden was just as vulnerable to the next storm, to late frosts, pests, or diseases. But he devoted half a lifetime to creating a “big wild garden” anyway. Despite the threats, gardeners soldier on, intent on satisfying their own artistic interests and creating something beyond themselves, something beautiful to share with others. The vision for the garden adapts to change out of necessity, and the garden benefits from the dynamism of creative thought.

The Path to Garden in the Woods
Born in Schuylerville, New York, in 1883, Will Curtis was a plant lover from an early age—he planted his first garden when he was nine. While working for a florist as a teenager, he began dreaming of one day having a big wildflower garden. His passion led him to earn a degree in landscape architecture from Cornell University and eventually to working as office manager for landscape architect Warren H. Manning, an early pioneer of the “wild garden” movement and a founding member of the American Society of Landscape Architects. Manning apprenticed with Frederick Law Olmsted, considered by many to be the father of American landscape architecture, before beginning his own design firm in Billerica, Massachusetts, in the 1890s. His influence on Curtis’s naturalistic gardening ethos is clear: Manning advocated for “a new type of gardening wherein the Landscapecer recognizes, first, the beauty of existing conditions and develops this beauty to the minutest detail.” Manning’s call for an American style of landscape design that enhanced and preserved the subtle beauty of nature is expressed in the way Curtis developed Garden in the Woods to take advantage of, rather than compete with, the natural features and topography of the site.

In 1931 Curtis stumbled upon a tract of land in Framingham that had “eskers with steep-sided valleys between, a pond, a wooden-bog, numerous springs, and an ever-flowing brook.” He described it as “a naturally beautiful place with interesting contours, many old trees, and a variety of typical New England vegetation” that was “just the spot for a wild flower garden.” The Old Colony Railroad, which had mined part of the land for its glacial gravel deposits, sold Curtis 30 acres for $1,000, and he began developing the gardens in earnest. By this time, Curtis was manager of Little Tree Farm in Framingham and was running a fairly successful landscape design and installation business. Garden in the Woods would become a living showcase of his capabilities, a more permanent exhibition than the award-winning flower show exhibits he designed and constructed to promote his professional services.

By 1933 construction of the garden was well underway, and the 50-year-old Curtis recruited 23–year-old Dick Stiles to help with the heavy lifting. Stiles was not a
horticulturist by training, but proved such a quick study that Curtis invited him to become a full partner in the garden in 1936. The pair spent the next 30 years developing a garden collection of North American native plants, a novel concept during that era. Among their creations, the First Garden (what we now call the Woodland Garden) is rich with spring ephemerals, woodland perennials, and flowering shrubs set beneath a high canopy of oaks. Here they used plants to create an almost rhythmic experience of light and shadow and an impressive spring display. They built the Lily Pond in 1935, using mules to dredge a shallow pond and make it habitable for a variety of aquatic plants. They created habitat gardens named for their inspiration and showcasing Curtis’s wide-ranging interests as a collector and propagator of plants: he developed an alpine garden he called Mt. Washington, a pine barren he called New Jersey, and a collection of western plants he called Montana.

By the mid-1960s, Curtis and Stiles had begun thinking about the future of their garden. Concerned about the encroaching suburban development, they realized the only way to prevent bulldozers from destroying their lifetime of work was to find a partner to whom they could entrust its care. Curtis shared his concern with his client and friend, Homer C. Lucas, an active member and fierce advocate for the New England Wild Flower Preservation Society. Lucas helped negotiate the transfer of ownership to the Society, with an agreement that required the Society to raise an endowment to support ongoing care and maintenance of the garden. On Curtis’s 82nd birthday, May 8, 1965, Curtis and Stiles gave Garden in the Woods to the Society. The two remained on staff—Curtis as Garden Director until his death in 1969, and Stiles as Curator until his retirement in 1970. (He passed away in 1984.) The Society moved its headquarters from downtown Boston to the site in 1968.
Thriving as Time Goes On

Since 1965 New England Wild Flower Society has continued to care for Garden in the Woods as a sanctuary for both plants and people. The hand of a single man with a vision became many hands shaping the Garden’s development. New challenges, like expanding parking for visitors and adding buildings to accommodate a growing staff, have required a multitude of changes. Through them all, the Society has clearly maintained Curtis’s rustic, naturalistic design and his emphasis on experimenting with “why wild flowers will grow here and not there.” Garden in the Woods is both a collector’s paradise, with more than 1,000 taxa of primarily New England native flora, and a casual visitor’s delight, especially in spring, when thousands of blooms burst forth in the warmth of April and May.

As the organization’s mission has evolved, so has the Garden. In 2010 the Society renewed its focus on New England native plants with a new mission statement—“to conserve and promote the region’s native plants to ensure healthy, biologically diverse landscapes”—and a strategic plan that calls for a broader and more engaged constituency for native plants. One of the steps in building that constituency is the development of a comprehensive master plan for Garden in the Woods. In 2012 we were fortunate to secure funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Hope Goddard Iselin Foundation to pursue that effort. The plan, scheduled for completion in October of this year, will serve as the overarching vision for the Garden for the next 25 years and beyond. It will help unify the organization’s conservation and horticulture messages, honor Curtis’s legacy, and build a roadmap for a resilient garden that can adapt to the effects of climate change.

The Society’s hope is that the master plan will launch a renaissance of Garden in the Woods that blends Curtis’s original vision for the garden as “a peaceful picture of our land as nature intended it” with modern sustainable design. The planning process, led by landscape architecture firm Andropogon Associates, whose guiding principle is “designing with nature,” reflects a careful and measured approach to design. The resulting plan will reflect our conservation ethos by embracing and guiding change in a manner that is both naturally beautiful and ecologically functional.

Dick Stiles wrote a tribute to Curtis that was published in the American Rock Garden Society Bulletin in April 1970, six months after his friend’s death. In it, he described Curtis as “a most unusual character: rugged, determined, resourceful, undeviatingly honest with no use whatsoever for so-called diplomacy.” He also referred to Curtis as “a man with vision, a true artist who knew exactly what he wanted and went to any amount of time and labor to achieve it.” In that same tribute, Stiles wrote that his own hope for the Garden was for it to “thrive and grow as time goes on.” That is the essence of the master plan—to reshape the vision for a garden that its founder created as his “contribution to conservation” and to ensure that it continues to thrive and grow as time goes on.

MARK RICHARDSON, DIRECTOR OF HORTICULTURE