



Adapting the Botanical Garden into a Sustainable, Multicultural Resource

Interview with Susan Lacerte Queens Botanical Garden, Flushing, NY

Anne Wiesen: How did Queens Botanical Garden become the garden that celebrates water?

We identified water as the unifying element at Queens Botanical Garden (QBG) because of its importance here on this site and because it is essential for all people in all parts of the world for our daily lives. We are located in one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the country, with over 130 languages spoken. In fact, 75 percent of Garden visitors speak a language other than English at home. Water functions as a metaphor for our common humanity.

With respect to the site, Mill Creek, a tributary of the Flushing River runs though this landscape and we thought at first that we would uncover it. But it's 13 feet underground, and it didn't make any sense. The water feature where you come in the main gate is an artistic and architectural reference to the tributary, and it functions as part of the water management system as well. There are a lot of flooding issues, and our goal is to manage 100 percent of water that falls from storms on site. The water in the channel will rise and fall with the weather conditions — if there is a drought the channel might be completely dry, but it would still be beautiful. So you may simultaneously relate to nature and enjoy a beautiful **architectural feature**.

I think the flooding issues are getting worse. Possibly global climate changes are causing these fast and furious storms that are flooding our arboretum. I've been here 13 years, and I've never seen flooding like

→ SEE MARSHALL AND HODA
PAGE 164

Watercourse traversing
the site.
PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION BY
JEFF GOLDBERG/ESTO

we've had this last year. Our designers always have said that when there is less open space, flooding is worse and water runs faster off of hard surfaces like streets and typical parking lots. The soil acts as a great big sponge. The idea is to slow down the water so that it doesn't overload the filtration systems. So in our parking garden that will be built next year, we're using permeable pavers so the water will percolate down into the soil and stay right here, on our site where it is needed and cherished. We want people to see these sustainable design innovations. So our [LEED platinum administration building and visitors' center] has a green roof that the public can get up to. And we'd like to start using rain barrels to catch water, something simpler that people can do at home.

Most large institutional gardens have not been in the forefront of sustainable design. How did Queens become engaged in sustainable building and operational systems design?

How QBG became engaged in sustainable design relates to how New York developed, and I see how we are a product of our times. The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) was founded in the mid-1800s when we looked to England and more widely to Europe for knowledge of botany. And at the time of NYBG's founding, the emphasis in Europe was on plant exploration and research. So the need to have a space, a conservatory and a herbarium, to keep plants in order to study them was primary. So that's their legacy. Brooklyn Botanic Garden (BBG) was founded in 1911 and what they did was to take the model of rectilinear beds for plant families — the Legume family, the Compositae family, etc. — that were popular in European botanical gardens and they blended in horticulture. So BBG brought plant systematics together with aesthetics and combined both as a teaching tool.

Then you come to our garden, which was opened in 1948 and was developed from the Gardens on Parade exhibit of the 1939 World's Fair, which was all about innovation. It was here that Jackson & Perkins mail order roses were introduced is my understanding, and hydroponics. This "first" Queens Botanical Garden was in Flushing Meadows Corona Park. And then we were moved here in 1963 to make way for the World's Fair in 1964, during a time when ecology, conservation, and such ideas were becoming popular. So at this new place a bird garden, bee garden, woodland garden, and other ecologically based gardens were added.



**Sloped green roof allows
visitors easy access.**

PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION
BY PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN SEITZ





In the 1990s Ashok Bhavnani, an architect, joined the board and he said to me: “Susan, you have an opportunity to be a leader among mid-sized botanic gardens in environmental design.” And he articulated to some degree this sustainable, environmental idea, which wasn’t common at the time. These ideas built upon what we already were. We picked [the architect and landscape architects] because of their interest in the environment and water and in trying to bring our cultural vision that we adopted in 1997, into the design. Our vision shows that we think of ourselves as “the place where people, plants, and cultures meet.” When we started getting into design for this project, we expanded the idea of sustainability and we really tried to marry those two ideas — culture and sustainability.

Would you say your focus on supporting cultural diversity comes from your location here in Flushing?

Oh, absolutely, and in Queens at large. Our vision to celebrate diversity and the significance of the cultures in the communities around us evolved as we became integrated in the communities. We developed our board to be very diverse over time and we started working with whomever we knew locally. Queensborough Hall was very helpful in pointing us in the right direction — to the leaders in the Hispanic, Chinese, and the Korean communities. And with the help of these leaders we put several cultural advisory committees together.

We created a position called “Cultural Specialist,” and offered an honorarium to three young people who had either been born in this country or had been born overseas but came here as a young child. They needed to understand both cultures. Each community wants to blend in and be part of America, but they also want to retain some of their own. We gave the cultural specialists an assignment to identify the 10 plants and the 10 holidays that are most important in the culture; the most important leaders in the community; and people from their community who are important in the press. And with their responses we published a book, “Harvesting Our History: A Botanical and Cultural Guide to Queens’ Chinese, Korean and Latin American Communities” that captured some of these ideas. The Cultural Specialists were also responsible for successfully engaging leaders to invite guests to plant-related cultural events for each community.

What were some of those cultural events?

Working with the Hispanic community, we learned that color is very important so we set up a flower arranging event. The event was very formal with a professional florist addressing an auditorium of formally dressed participants. The florist created some very showy pieces, for example, he took white carnations, sprayed them blue and made a poodle out of them. Everyone in the audience loved it and clapped enthusiastically.

Then we had a Korean-born plant specialist from a botanical garden come in to give a talk in Korean and English about the plants that are important in the landscape from that part of the world. The Koreans have such a reverence for elders and for learning. Later, we helped the Korean community establish a Circle Garden of these important plants on the grounds here. The community raised \$5,000 through an event called “Cosmos Night” over 3 consecutive years and that helped sponsor the Circle Garden. The cosmos is important in Korean celebrations.

In the Chinese community, years ago, we had Mark Lii, founder of Ten Ren Tea and Ginseng Company, hold a press conference at the Garden in Chinese in advance of our Four Seasons Chinese Tea Ceremony. The ambassador to Taiwan attended and said that Mark Lii is going to revolutionize tea drinking in America. Mark’s got a teashop here in Flushing, in Chinatown, and in all the different Chinese sections of the city. I was introduced to Mark, he became a QBG Board Member, and that’s how you build bridges.

We have relationships with certain cultural communities and we keep those and work with them. At this point we’re doing a multilingual visitor brochure. I would like to see these cultural connections have a more physical presence in the garden.

We did some research where we took people to the market on Main Street because we had learned that people didn’t always feel welcome walking into a store of another culture. Often times the shop owners don’t speak English and because of this many of the signs are not in English either. But just by having tours with small groups of people that go into the market — to the Chinese Herb Shop, to the Indian Sari store, the Korean Specialty Shop — we made friends and the merchants loved it. And our members who might have been curious and passed by everyday, but never went in, made a connection. These are some of the

ways we reach out to our communities, ways we value their culture and work, their ways of being a family and making home. In a sense, we bring the Garden to them!

In what ways does QBG support the health of the surrounding community?

Quite literally, we partner with the New York Hospital Medical Center, Queens, up the street. They also cater to largely Asian populations, and their approach to cross-cultural relations is very similar to ours. For instance, they respect language differences and so they'll send a Chinese-speaking doctor to come to the Garden and run health days where the doctor runs free cholesterol and blood pressure tests and talks to people about healthy lifestyles. We then sponsor Tai Chi here; every morning there are somewhere around 100 people practicing in the garden. It's so beautiful, and is a great traditional use of a garden. And you see diversity in the faces of the people who visit this garden every single day.

We've also done a project where we've put more Asian plants into the herb garden to educate people further about the Chinese herbs they may be taking. **Having one's culture reflected publicly and powerfully can be a great stimulus to feelings of pride, acceptance, and positive integration.** These are more about the social components that relate to health. Finally, the Medical Center has adopted a tree on their grounds. So there's cross-fertilization happening where the Center is using our method by planting and respecting trees, and we're hosting healthy days. We have a very good relationship.

How does your plant selection relate to your dual goals of sustainability and cultural diversity?

Native plants were selected for most areas because they are better adapted to the local conditions and so they need less care. Although they are beautiful, not everybody wants native plants. The brides and grooms who hold their ceremonies at the Garden want color. And concert planners want an outdoor venue. While the QBG arboretum, which is now managed as a meadow, has been the site of 5,000 person gatherings in the past, we can no longer do this because the plants in the meadow don't leave a place where that many people can gather.



Visitors practicing tai chi.

PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION
BY PHOTOGRAPHER JASON GREEN

And there are some people who say we have gone backwards because they see a lot of ‘weeds’ out there. There’s some education that needs to happen on both sides. This year I said I want an edge on that meadow so that people have the idea that it is deliberate. And we need to make it more beautiful. I’m not making a judgment that native plants aren’t beautiful. But the public taste is for more for showy, colorful plants.

An impression that I’ve developed over the years working with people of different cultures is that a lot of people who come here to Flushing come from countries that are agricultural. Farming is a hard life. And they left the farm. They left those 12-14 hour days of hard labor and they don’t want that kind of life anymore. They want to see something in the landscape that reminds them not of work, but of the celebrations, or peaceful moments they’ve known and can be inspired to continue.

What elements do you think are important in a 21st century park, botanical garden, or open space?

Well I wrote an article for “Public Garden” a year ago. I had some Cornell students to my house for dinner, and asked them what their idea of a



Watercourse (*above*) continues through the built landscape (*next page*) and resolves in a remediating bioswale.

PHOTOS USED WITH PERMISSION BY PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN SEITZ







garden was. And what I came away with was that American gardens started off in this venerable European model where people would go to a garden to enjoy beauty and maybe to study plants. But technology has changed everything. People now expect information at their fingertips because they can go online, research, and learn so many things instantly. People are using gardens in so many different ways. I've read articles about putting a chip in a tree, and then with a handheld device, in whatever language they want, people can find out about that tree. I think that for gardens to be players in the world we've got to figure out: how can we continue to be relevant to people in this time of great technology? Does it make sense to emphasize gardens as a completely different experience from what's available to us electronically? Gardens are very local, as you know. And gardens move at a different tempo. Plants take time to grow. It could be the Garden's salvation because, I would think, the pendulum swings.

Would the components that make Queens Botanical Garden successful scale up to open space across the city?

Yes, what we are doing here would definitely scale up for larger areas of the city. Just think if more places had green roofs what a different city this would be! Just think if we did not treat all water to potable or drinkable standards but treated just what we needed and used water more efficiently. Just think if every building captured the sun's light and made it into energy for the building, just like plants turn the sun's light into energy for the plant. We'd have a cooler, more beautiful city, less flooding, fuller reservoirs and lakes, and less land used for all sorts of support facilities leaving more for open space, something I've found so important for my sense of spirit and beauty. We'd have a greener city and a healthier city. Not that I think what we have now is bad, it's just that it could be better, and doing so is within our grasp. It takes consciousness, determination and persistence, and all of us working together. We can lead in so many ways and I'm so proud that the Queens Botanical Garden is on the leading edge of this green phenomenon that is sweeping the nation. I hope everyone will join in!

Dialogue With Colleague:

How wonderful that QBG is connecting the personal experience of health and well-being with the wider health of our city and planet. These connections allow us to see ourselves as living creatures that are members of an interconnected web of life. Demonstrating the practical steps that help us locate our dwelling and work places within a living ecosystem is a powerful tool for restoring our sense of connection, responsibility, and spiritual heritage. Karl Linn once said “From time immemorial, people of indigenous or land-based cultures have celebrated their connectedness with nature as an integral part of their daily lives. Free and enduring access to air, water, and land assured their sustenance and survival.” Linn felt places such as community gardens and urban green spaces were the last remnants of this experience in modern life. I think the botanical gardens serve this function for many people in our city.

We are overstimulated and oversuggested as to what is beautiful. It’s hard to experience the subtle, awesome beauty of natural landscapes. On one hand we want people to feel connected to a garden experience, to be pleased by scent, color, shape. On the other hand, so many people need the soothing experience of a meadow or leaf strewn forest floor. I find urban residents are craving, are starving for peaceful experiences in nature. Botanical garden visitors often seek respite, quiet, and gravitate to the less designed areas, or perhaps areas intentionally “less designed”. How significant is the preservation of a natural environment — one that looks and feels and enacts the rhythms of our seasons — to a sustainable society? What is the role of a botanical garden in providing this experience, through design, landscape, and/or educational experience?

Susan Fields

GreenBridge Manager, Brooklyn Botanic Garden