Learning and Engagement Plan
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Mission Statement

The mission of Smith College is to link the power of the liberal arts to excellence in research and scholarship, thereby developing engaged global citizens and leaders to address society’s challenges.

Grounded within that framework, the Botanic Garden of Smith College fosters environmental and social justice through teaching and learning about plants, people and place.

We do this by:

- Curating plant collections that help us tell stories about plant and human diversity.

- Training students to be informed and effective change agents.

- Preparing educators to develop effective, interdisciplinary, learner-centric experiences.

- Welcoming visitors to learn, explore and contribute their knowledge.

- Designing spaces and landscapes that stimulate thought, foster well-being and facilitate collaboration.
Document Purpose and Overview

The purpose of the Botanic Garden of Smith College’s Learning and Engagement Plan (LEP) is threefold:

- To communicate our overarching educational vision and core educational themes to staff, volunteers, campus partners and community stakeholders;
- To guide our educational priorities and strategies; and
- To ensure that those priorities and strategies advance Smith College’s mission.

The LEP is part assessment of our current work and part vision for the future, anchored in the botanic garden’s larger strategic plan, *125 Years in the Making: 2019-2024*, which prioritizes:

- Placing Smith students at the center of everything the botanic garden does and ensuring every botanic garden initiative is an opportunity for students to get involved.
- Celebrating human diversity and ensuring the botanic garden is physically and psychologically accessible to people of all backgrounds, identities and abilities.
- Investing in and preparing the next generation of institutional leaders through curricular engagements, internships, professional development opportunities and staff mentorship.
- Ensuring that botanic garden spaces foster and facilitate discovery and exploration.

The botanic garden’s revised mission statement and its recently completed *Collections Management Plan* also guided the development of this plan.

This document is the culmination of three years of work assessing and examining the purpose of the Botanic Garden of Smith College as an academic botanic garden, as a botanic garden in the 21st century and as the steward of one of Smith College’s unique teaching collections. It was developed by botanic garden educators, curators, arborists and horticulturists, and informed by insights and questions raised by other botanic garden stakeholders—students, faculty, staff, volunteers, alums and community members—as well as colleagues from partnering institutions around the country.
We hope that our educational efforts inspire learners to translate their curiosity about plants into inquiry and action in service to the botanical world, within a framework of environmental and social justice. In order to understand how best to achieve this goal, we first worked to understand our users and their needs, as well as the botanic garden’s specific resources, strengths and weaknesses. Our efforts included an internal SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis, focus groups and surveys, staff charrettes and course collaborations, each aimed at interrogating our current practices and exploring the impact we are having on our users.

These efforts have culminated in the following actions, as put forward in this plan:

- Defining our vision and approach to teaching and learning.
- Developing a series of principles to guide our educational work.
- Centralizing our engagement and interpretive efforts around three key topics and their corresponding themes.
At the Botanic Garden of Smith College, teaching and learning are at the heart of our work. As educators, botanic garden staff and volunteers bring a range of resources, styles and expertises to our teaching. We believe in a constructivist approach to teaching, stressing the active involvement of learners as they create meaning and knowledge from their experiences with our staff, spaces, collections and gardens. Our educational initiatives are anchored in a commitment to initiating or expanding plant literacy, while providing learners with information and context to aid in their understanding of—and sense of connection to—the botanical world. Through the unique lens of plants, ecology and the history of botanical study, we hope to inspire learners to develop the knowledge and passion needed to act in support of building a more sustainable, equitable and just world.

Vision and Approach to Education

At the Botanic Garden of Smith College, teaching and learning are at the heart of our work. As educators, botanic garden staff and volunteers bring a range of resources, styles and expertises to our teaching. We believe in a constructivist approach to teaching, stressing the active involvement of learners as they create meaning and knowledge from their experiences with our staff, spaces, collections and gardens. Our educational initiatives are anchored in a commitment to initiating or expanding plant literacy, while providing learners with information and context to aid in their understanding of—and sense of connection to—the botanical world. Through the unique lens of plants, ecology and the history of botanical study, we hope to inspire learners to develop the knowledge and passion needed to act in support of building a more sustainable, equitable and just world.
Guiding Principles

Place-Based and Experiential
To best learn about plants, people must experience them firsthand. We invite active discovery by connecting people directly with our collections. Our goal is for this physical experience to transcend the boundaries of our campus and inspire a lifelong journey of engagement with plants, and action in support of the environment.

Equitable and Inclusive
We work to represent a wide range of perspectives and experiences; center, amplify and lift up marginalized voices; and critically examine botanical history, approaches and practices. We must continuously recommit ourselves to these actions. It is important for us to build relationships with marginalized, underresourced and underrepresented communities before we invite individuals into our work so that we can cultivate lasting partnerships and relationships based on benefit sharing, collaboration, appreciation for difference, and empathy.

Collaborative and Learner-centric
Collectively, we are educators and students, experts and novices. We work collaboratively to integrate the liberal arts into our exhibits and botanical narratives. We value curiosity, the beginner’s mind and the individual lived experience. We invite learners to contribute their own insights and experiences in order to collectively build knowledge of our staff and users alike.

Reflective and Evaluative
Regularly engaging in critique—the practice of intentional and ongoing analysis and assessment of our goals and outcomes—supports our greater mission and is an essential element in ensuring that we are offering informed and valuable educational initiatives. To accurately gauge our impact, we must carefully craft formal and informal assessments, gather feedback from our stakeholders, and analyze data regularly. Equally important to these steps is the reflection and iteration that follows. This cycle supports our mission and ultimately creates a stronger and more impactful organization.

Relevant and Responsive
Public gardens are dynamic spaces that sit at the forefront of many pressing issues of the day. They enable us to explore humanity’s complex urgent problems through both social and environmental lenses. By engaging learners with these issues, we offer opportunities for them to delve deeply into topics while exploring solutions and supporting well-informed action. Our commitment to nurturing curiosity, flexibility and growth in response to the world around us is key to providing the most relevant and transformative experiences for learners.
The stories we choose to tell and the topics we teach matter. Our vision is for the Botanic Garden of Smith College to change how learners understand the botanical world and their place in it. Our teaching and education is focused around three broad topics and their corresponding themes: Science, Culture and Place.

Connecting our learners with these topics occurs through a multipronged approach. We utilize face-to-face teaching in the form of integration with Smith courses and guided tours, develop and host mission-focused exhibits, curate our collections to reflect these themes, and treat our spaces as places for experiential learning, inviting students and visitors to share their experiences and interests with us through workshops, programming and research. Below are examples of the way we intend to connect our audiences—students, faculty and staff, K-12 school groups, visitors and alums—with our work.
SCIENCE

Teaching the building blocks of plant science is core to our educational identity. By anchoring our educational opportunities in the sciences, students can more fully explore, communicate about, and appreciate the botanical world. By studying basic biology and ecology, stakeholders begin to understand the key role plants play in sustaining all life, and can begin to proactively apply these concepts in support of real-world problem solving. Key topics of exploration include botany and horticulture; biology and ecology; biodiversity and conservation; and climate change and sustainability.

Guiding Theme and Subthemes

1. Knowledge of plant science underpins the development of informed, engaged leaders and global citizens.

1.1 Anchoring learner knowledge in plant structure and function provides a foundation on which to develop an appreciation for the diversity of the botanical world. Basic plant knowledge is the foundation for close observation of plants. This in turn provides the opportunity to better understand the world around us, which has the potential to foster connection and encourage new modes of inquiry, creativity and inspiration.

1.2 Understanding biological processes and ecological interdependencies inspires connection to the world and a sense of responsibility for its ethical and sustainable stewardship. This knowledge can lead to a desire to protect and advocate for plant life, while also providing learners with the foundation needed to be informed and effective science communicators.

1.3 Creating biodiverse landscapes and engaging in regional, national and international plant conservation protects ecosystems and supports a sustainable future. Taking action at a local, regional and international level provides essential experiential learning opportunities, supports the health and restoration of our surrounding environment, and helps learners build identities as capable problem solvers and change agents.

1.4 Learning about plants is a key aspect of understanding complex environmental issues including climate change and sustainability. Plants offer a joyful gateway into a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of many urgent environmental challenges, while also directly informing creative solutions and critical action.
Established in 2022 as part of the new Collections Management Plan, the conservation internship provides hands-on opportunities for students to participate in conservation efforts that go beyond symbolic stewardship of rare species. Through collaborations with local nonprofits and founder plot and meta-collection building and management, the conservation intern becomes well-versed in the key ways that modern botanic gardens are aiming to address biodiversity loss. This program provides unique and valuable experience to students interested in pursuing careers in public gardens and conservation.
CULTURE

Throughout history, humans have used plants to sustain themselves physically and spiritually. This essential relationship with plants is central to our collective identity as people. Plants have impacted the development of cultures, just as humans have impacted plants. The immense and significant value of plants to human life has been the motivating factor behind both inspired progress and terrible violence and conquest. Our collection presents an important opportunity to explore the complex histories and multifaceted stories at the intersection of people and plants. Key topics of exploration include economic botany; environmental justice; persistent colonial frameworks and legacies; and ways of knowing and traditional ecological knowledge.

Guiding Theme and Subthemes

2. The relationships between people and plants reveal complex human and environmental histories.

2.1 Studying human use of plants through history teaches us about human cultures and societies from around the world. Exploring the global economic uses of plants helps us to better understand human motivations, values and experiences.

2.2 The ways in which humans have utilized plants throughout time has contributed to the oppression of peoples. We must reflect on, and educate about, the extractive and settler colonial frameworks on which botanical gardens and plant collecting were founded.

2.3 Dominant narratives around botanical research and history have centered on those in power and have largely ignored the contributions of people from marginalized groups. We must continue to center our interpretation on underrepresented narratives and ways of knowing. To do this work authentically, we must foster relationships with and defer to partners who have diverse perspectives and lived experiences in order to fully explore and tell stories through multiple lenses.

2.4 Traditional ecological knowledge is critical to fully understanding plants. Western science is built on settler colonial frameworks which often marginalize or discredit indigenous knowledge. By presenting a diversity of ecological perspectives and ways of knowing, we are able to more fully explore, understand and relate to the plant kingdom.
In the face of oppression, people have and always will resist and organize. Farmworkers are no exception. Through the words and portraits of farmworkers in Western Massachusetts, the No Somos Máquinas exhibit explores the broken immigration system, the exclusion of farmworkers from basic labor protections, and the conditions that have compelled them to rise up.

Developed by the Pioneer Valley Workers Center with the support of the Botanic Garden of Smith College, this fully bilingual exhibit sheds light on the experiences of local farmworkers. It consists of portraits, interpretive panels, and a timeline of farmworker organizing, as well as audio of oral history excerpts.
The Botanic Garden of Smith College is deeply rooted in the liberal arts and is a foundation of the Smith experience. Founded on the premise that the scientific study of plants and their ornamental value could complement one another on a college campus, the Smith landscape and botanical holdings have inspired countless students, faculty and visitors. Today, we work with courses across the curriculum to make connections between botanical study and the liberal arts, and advocate for its use and enhancement as a learning resource.

As keepers of the Smith landscape, we bear a responsibility to work with stakeholders to ensure it is a reflection of current values. We play a role in sharing its history and stewarding it ethically and intentionally from both an ecological and a culturally inclusive perspective. Key topics of exploration include local and institutional history; campus and conservatory as classroom; landscape design and placemaking; and sustainability and stewardship.

Guiding Theme and Subthemes

3. The landscape of Smith College is an essential part of the Smith experience.

3.1 Smith College and the botanic garden are inextricably linked to the history of the land on which they are built. The land on which the botanic garden is sited, Nonotuck, is the ancestral lands of the Nipmuc and Pocumtuc peoples. We have a responsibility to tell the multitude of stories behind the acquisition of Smith’s land and to share its full history.

3.2 The Botanic Garden of Smith College is a key partner in facilitating Smith College’s strategic emphasis on the campus as classroom model of learning. The botanic garden is a resource in providing students a space for hands-on learning, research and academic inquiry. We work with students from all disciplines to make connections between our collections and their academic interests.

3.3 Students live and study among the gardens, greenhouses and landscapes that comprise the Botanic Garden of Smith College and have a unique relationship to the campus. These spaces are an important aspect of their college experience. They foster relaxation and connection with the natural world, and also present an opportunity for students to connect their academic learning with their immediate surroundings.

3.4 As stewards of the Smith landscape, the Botanic Garden of Smith College staff strive to continuously evolve the campus landscape to reflect the values of its diverse stakeholders. As keepers of the Smith landscape, we are constantly evolving our interpretation of our collection and employing sustainable and inclusive practices in our management and curation.
A Curricular Enhancement Program Grant recipient in spring 2021, Chris Aiken and Angie Hauser’s newly-developed course DAN 339 Movement, Ecology and Performance, explores how place and landscape offer inspiration and opportunities for dance, performance and embodied experiences. Through incorporating the study of landscape, geology, anthropology, phenology, hydrology and indigenous studies with the study of dance, students explore how creativity is found in relationship to things, beings, environments, and the historical and cultural contexts.

(Photo by Derek Fowles.)
Strategies for Success

The following strategies are proposed to best serve our users and enhance learner experiences. The goals below reflect our educational principles in action and highlight our priorities by both audience and location.

1. USERS

1.1 STUDENTS

1.1.1 Provide career building conservation experience for Smith students through a year-round internship program. *(Collections Management Plan [CMP] 1.5)*

1.1.2 Establish a student educator program that brings students into our teaching initiatives.

1.1.3 Establish a formal education internship.

1.1.4 Provide pathways for students to co-develop exhibits and interpretation.

1.1.5 Use First-Year Seminars (FYS) as a gateway opportunity for students to learn about the botanic garden by regularly hosting FYS tours and engagements.

1.1.6 Establish a student advisory board composed of current and former student interns and work-study students to provide feedback on the botanic garden’s impact on student experience.

1.1.7 Continue targeted outreach to Bridge students, Unity organizations, and first-generation students to actively invite students of color and first-generation students to utilize our resources.

1.1.8 Collaborate with campus partners to host events aimed at increasing student access to botanic garden resources and spaces.

1.1.9 Increase opportunities for peer-to-peer education through plant clinics, workshops and collaborative events.

1.1.10 Increase student-centered communications by creating a student e-newsletter and student-specific Slack channels.
1.2 FACULTY AND TEACHING STAFF

1.2.1 Relaunch the Curricular Enhancement Program with priority given to faculty projects related to our educational priorities and interpretive themes.

1.2.2 Pilot collaborative Curricular Enhancement Program grants that connect faculty with the botanic garden and additional campus partners.

1.2.3 Establish a bank of student projects, list of botanical courses and directory of advisers whose expertise can be leveraged to provide the greatest impact on student learning.

1.2.4 Customize tours and learning opportunities by standardizing our intake process to ensure that the right staff member connects with the right course.

1.2.5 Identify the services we provide faculty and communicate these through our website and targeted outreach.

1.2.6 Streamline the visiting process and make it more transparent to faculty through timely communications.

1.2.7 Strengthen relationships with key faculty from across the curriculum.

1.2.8 Partner with faculty to bring the curriculum into the development of exhibits.

1.2.9 Broaden curricular engagement with collections through targeted assessment of instructor needs. (CMP 3.1)

1.3 K-12 EDUCATORS AND THEIR STUDENTS

1.3.1 Develop and implement field-trip activities aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

1.3.2 Systematize evaluation and assessment with post-visit surveys.

1.3.3 Work with Campus School of Smith College educators and the Smith College Department of Education and Child Study to develop scalable, high-quality lessons.

1.3.4 Increase co-teaching opportunities for student educators and volunteers by strategically coordinating field-trip times with course timeblocks.

1.3.5 Collaborate with the Smith College Museum of Art, special collections and other departments to streamline how K-12 field trips are scheduled and managed.
1.4 CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS
1.4.1 Identify key partners and standardize the practice of collaborating with them on exhibit development, event hosting and resource sharing.
1.4.2 Contribute to local, in situ rare-plant conservation efforts through participation in Native Plant Trust’s Plant Conservation Volunteer Program. (CMP 1.2)
1.4.3 Partner with other botanic gardens to establish conservation-focused meta-collections. (CMP 1.4)
1.4.4 Highlight the value of our collections to real-world problem solving by identifying partners for building research collections. (CMP 3.3)
1.4.5 Fortify and sustain rare native plant populations by identifying high-impact propagation and collections-building projects that will complement the work of other regional partners. (CMP 3.2)

1.5 VOLUNTEERS
1.5.1 Implement background checks for volunteers.
1.5.2 Train volunteers to lead learning activities during tours.
1.5.3 Enable volunteers to take the lead on continued learning opportunities and volunteer recruitment.
1.5.4 Include anti-bias training in volunteer orientation.
1.5.5 Restructure training to better connect community volunteers with students.
1.5.6 Use volunteers to support educational efforts during our flower shows and events.

1.6 VISITORS
1.6.1 Develop participatory exhibits that invite visitors to share their own knowledge and experiences.
1.6.2 Develop interpretation that is mission-focused and relevant to a wide range of users.
1.6.3 Conduct a series of user-experience surveys to better understand the visitor experience, from beginning to end.
1.6.4 Prioritize hosting speakers with diverse backgrounds and lived experiences for public lectures.

1.7 ALUMNAE, FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS
1.7.1 Explore co-sponsored events with Smith clubs.
1.7.2 Actively participate in Reunion events.
1.7.3 Bring the Friends of the Botanic Garden Leadership Council into our work with timely, personalized communications.
2. LOCATIONS

2.1 LYMAN RECEPTION AREA
   2.1.1 Launch a garden app and use it as a primary means for information sharing. Promote it at the front desk through signage and welcome orientation.
   2.1.2 Streamline garden pamphlets, brochures and maps, and promote information through the garden app.
   2.1.3 Purchase tablets for visitors to ensure accessibility to app information.
   2.1.4 Align signage in the reception area with brand standards.
   2.1.5 Allocate more space to education and visitor engagement by restructuring the gift shop.
   2.1.6 Incorporate education and visitor feedback through interactive displays in Lyman reception area.
   2.1.7 Launch “The Garden Report,” a weekly showcase of cuttings from our gardens, curated by work-study students and displayed in Lyman Plant House and Conservatory.

2.2 LYMAN PLANT HOUSE AND CONSERVATORY
   2.2.1 Conduct an accessibility audit with the Office of Disability Services.
   2.2.2 Redesign way-finding signage.
   2.2.3 Host exhibits in Physiology and Cold Storage when shows are not utilizing the space.
   2.2.4 Maximize seating throughout Lyman.
   2.2.5 Deploy app exhibits and signage on a rotating schedule.
   2.2.6 Create and implement new labels to make conservation status and provenance more visible.
   2.2.7 Implement signage in Lyman Conservatory that facilitates interaction and highlights our key interpretive themes.

2.3 GALLERIES AND INTERPRETATION
   2.3.1 Explore creating a lounge in the Church Gallery to right-size exhibits.
   2.3.2 Pilot student exhibits in the gallery.
   2.3.3 Develop and host co-created exhibits aligned with our mission and educational and interpretive themes.
   2.3.4 Identify salient priorities for addressing racist and colonial legacies by commissioning a review of our curatorial practices. (CMP 2.1)
   2.3.5 Review plant records and signage for scientific names, common names and accompanying data that is racist, bigoted, and/or white-centric. (CMP 2.2)
2.4 ARBORETUM
  2.4.1 Highlight tree-related conservation work through the garden app and thematic tours.
  2.4.2 Inventory TreeSpeak labels annually to ensure they are in working condition.
  2.4.3 Anchor Arbor Day for community connection and increased education.
  2.4.4 Partner with the Women’s Tree Climbing Workshop to host tree-climbing events that create a safe, encouraging and empowering learning environment for women and nonbinary people to explore climbing.

2.5 GARDENS
  2.5.1 Align current garden interpretation and brochures with our interpretive themes.
  2.5.2 Reimagine Capen Garden, Trudy’s Garden and the Woodland Garden to reflect current educational goals and themes.
  2.5.3 Make our work visible through signage.
  2.5.4 Use the gardens as exhibit spaces.
  2.5.5 Relaunch the Learning Garden as a student-directed space.
  2.5.6 Develop tours highlighting garden spaces.
  2.5.7 Host events, workshops and programming in the gardens.
  2.5.8 Elevate the capacity and resilience of local habitat restoration projects by establishing accessioned, on-campus founder plots in collaboration with Native Plant Trust and the Norcross Wildlife Sanctuary. (CMP 1.1)
  2.5.9 Improve visibility of Endangered Species Collection by developing interpretive signage. (CMP 3.4)
  2.5.10 Support the creation of a living campus gene bank by reorienting onsite propagation to native woody species of known provenance. (CMP 1.3)
  2.5.11 Promote sustainable landscape practices by informing our community of our commitment to a healthy environment. (CMP 4.7)
  2.5.12 Increase capacity to build sustainable landscapes through staff education. (CMP 4.1)
Emerging Horizons: Recommendations for the Future

We look forward to developing future efforts around the following priorities. They are included here to provide next steps in our work to build a more inclusive, diverse, equitable and accessible organization.

PRIORITY 1: CAPACITY

1.1 STAFF AND SPACE
As we look to meet the needs of our users and continue our efforts to build an equitable and accessible organization, our spaces, staff and collections have ever-growing demands placed upon them. While we encourage and nurture this enthusiasm, we also recognize that we are pushing up against the boundaries of our physical spaces and individual capacities. It remains important for us to be realistic about what our space and current staff can support and to proactively plan for a future of increasing student engagement and demand.

PRIORITY 2: USER EXPERIENCE AND ACCESSIBILITY

2.1 WEBSITE
For many of our visitors, their experience with the botanic garden begins on our website, so it is essential to review and update it regularly.

2.2 ACCESSIBILITY
For our users to feel empowered in their learning, our spaces must be free of barriers, both seen and unseen. This requires transforming the layout of our space as well as revamping our outreach efforts and materials. While we have identified a number of strategies intended to cultivate accessibility, we plan to gain an even greater understanding of what our users require through more comprehensive outreach and review.
PRIORITY 3: FIVE COLLEGES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

3.1 FIVE COLLEGE CONSORTIUM
As a member of the Five College Consortium, we are positioned to benefit from a network of expertise in those fields and disciplines related to our priorities. At this time, garden staff have limited capacity to deeply foster these relationships, but there is significant potential for meaningful collaboration among the Five College institutions.

3.2 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
The Botanic Garden of Smith College is a beloved part of the greater community. While students remain our priority, we believe that strong engagement outside of Smith serves our community along with our students. Authentic relationship-building takes both time and commitment, and with that in mind, we aim to continue to build diverse collaborations with community partners that are impactful and mutually beneficial.

PRIORITY 4: ALUM AND SUPPORTER ENGAGEMENT

4.1 ALUMS
Our alums are some of our strongest supporters and champions. While we regularly engage with them through our communications, events and Reunions, we recognize there is a wish for more connection. In the future, we hope to identify key desires of our alum community and find ways of better serving this important group of stakeholders.

4.2 FRIENDS
While many of the Friends of the Botanic Garden of Smith College are alums, our membership is also composed of frequent visitors, community members and general supporters. These stakeholders are an important part of our work and we need to continue to provide meaningful pathways for engagement.
The Botanic Garden of Smith College
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This policy was approved by cabinet sponsor Michael Thurston, Provost and Dean of the Faculty, on the 6th of December 2022.