

00;00;02;02 - 00;00;33;09

Yvette Weaver: Welcome to Rooted in People. The human side of public gardens. Public gardens are more than beautiful views and carefully curated plants. They enrich communities and the lives of their employees. In this podcast series, we, the 2024-2025 cohort of the Longwood Gardens Fellows Program, will engage in conversations with leaders of public gardens. We will explore how their garden has cultivated these communities.

00;00;33;12 - 00;00;45;21

We invite you to grab your headphones and listen in to this series full of inspiration, insight, and reflection that may transform your perspective on the garden world around you.

00;00;45;21 - 00;01;16;15

Anastasia Sallen: Hello, I'm Anastasia Sallen with Longwood Gardens Fellows Program. Today I have the pleasure of speaking with Matt Rader, president of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. PHS serves 230 neighborhoods in Philadelphia and its surrounding counties and is well known for the annual Philadelphia Flower Show. Matt is in his 10th year at PHS. He has an undergraduate degree in architectural history from the University of Virginia and an MBA from the Wharton School.

00;01;16;18 - 00;01;41;05

Matt loves making cities better. Welcome to the show, Matt.

Matt Rader: Thanks, Anastasia. It's good to be here.

Anastasia: So, the last time we spoke, you told me that social sustainability is at the heart of everything PHS does. Can you share a little bit more about PHS' purpose and four determinants of health?

Matt: Yeah. So PHS is really rooted, now, we're almost 200 years old.

00;01;41;05 - 00;02;05;15

Matt: So, we've been many things over our life. But we're really rooted in the idea that horticulture is an incredible superpower for people to change the social and physical reality of their worlds in ways that advance health and well-being. So, we say our purpose is using horticulture to advance health and well-being, and then you have to move from the conceptual to the measurable.

00;02;05;15 - 00;02;28;00

And so then we look at four social determinants of health, which are factors in the physical or social world that lead to health. And the four we focus on are economic opportunity, so a good job or good business opportunity, livable environments, which is a place to live that is, you know, healthy for you, climate wise, safety, visual, etc.

00;02;28;02 - 00;02;42;00

Access to fresh food and access to strong social connections, you know, fighting the isolation pandemic. So, across our work, we're trying to use horticulture in different ways to advance those four factors.

00;02;42;00 - 00;02;45;18

Anastasia: Can you tell the story about kind of how this started?

00;02;45;21 - 00;03;22;05

Matt: Yeah. So PHS at almost 200 years old, is a constant work in progress. And something that I think is very cool about this organization is it's as entrepreneurial and energetic and fast changing now as it has ever been. So, versus something that, you know, kind of developed in reach and set form and carried that out. We're constantly changing. So, in 2019, we really adopted this focus on health and wellbeing and the four impact priorities as our, our guiding purpose and began to cause all parts of your organization to work together to advance them.

00;03;22;08 - 00;03;49;05

But the origins of it go much further back. So, in the early 1970s PHS was a great organization, but one very focused on serving its members with education and the flower show, and a really transformative leader, Ernesta Ballard—who's ironically, one of the first people I met when I moved to Philadelphia—um, said, you know, what can we do to also serve the broader city?

00;03;49;06 - 00;04;12;00

It was a time where there was a lot of focus on quality of life. It's the time that Nixon administration birthed the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act. And so Ernesta thought, how do we take this institution and move from just serving its members to also having a mission of serving the outside city? And then that mission evolved kind of in parallel track over the next, you know, 40, 50 years.

00;04;12;02 - 00;04;48;07

And then in 2019, we really committed that the entire institution's purpose was using horticulture to advance health, health and wellbeing. And that work was done in an incredibly collaborative way. So, we're an organization that's heavily dependent on earned and contributed revenue. No giant endowment to fuel it. So, we looked at the convergence of things that this region needed to work on in any domain, things that horticulture could meaningfully make an impact on, and things that people actually seemed interested in supporting with their volunteer time and their labor.

00;04;48;11 - 00;05;20;17

And we did, you know, tons of outreach surveys, market research, focus groups, direct intervention, and really tried to build, an inclusive group that really reflected the rich diversity and all dimensions of this region, to look at all that data and come up with the central purpose for PHS that felt relevant to needs and supportable and doable with horticulture, because from a mission driven point of view, I never wanted to get to a place where we were focused on the issue, but not the means, because we're the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society.

00;05;20;17 - 00;05;27;10

So. So our challenge is to use that incredibly powerful tool in new ways to advance, social health.

00;05;27;10 - 00;05;45;06

Anastasia: So, who was involved in that process? What did that look like?

Matt: Lots and lots of people. So, PHS is an organization with, um, something like 350,000 annual visitors, if you wanted to think of it that way, to the flower show and our pop-up gardens.

00;05;45;08 - 00;06;08;06

And then we also have, we serve, more than a million people with our work. So that's, I think it's a million and a half people live within five-minute walk of, of our work. And it's incredible. And then you have tens of thousands of volunteers and members and donors, and we really think of ourselves like a community that works together to deliver the impact.

00;06;08;06 - 00;06;29;19

So, I say it's kind of like public radio. We're going to do it for you regardless of whether you contribute or not. But the more that you contribute your time, your money, your passion, the more impact we're going to create that benefits all of us. And so, when we approach visioning and strategic planning, we had to do it with that whole community because that's the group that produces together.

00;06;29;22 - 00;06;56;14

So, we started with all the people currently involved and found different ways to engage. We also were speculative and going out to, leaders who we thought should be engaged and, and invited them into the puzzle. We reached out to people who give to similar causes and tried to learn about whether they would be interested in horticulture. We heard some amazing conversations like, you guys should hook up with this Tree Tenders group.

00;06;56;14 - 00;07;29;20

And we said, we are the Tree Tenders group.

Anastasia: [laughter]

Matt: It's good that you don't know that that's us.

And so really intensive market research, community engagement, tabling at block parties. You know activations at the flower show, a steering committee that included established leaders and new invites. And then working through those cycles of iteration over really 18 months to get to a place where we felt confident about this purpose and then, more importantly, the steps we needed to take to evolve the organization, to embed that purpose and build a sustainable business model.

00;07;29;20 - 00;07;33;17

Anastasia: So, what does that purpose look like in action?

00;07;33;17 - 00;07;44;05

Matt: So, I think there's, there's four big ways that you can— four methods that you can imagine we cause horticulture to be used to advance health and well-being.

00;07;44;07 - 00;08;09;09

And the first is what we do with our members and home gardeners via education, which is trying to move from just sharing information and beautiful images to giving people ideas about how they can use their home gardening practice to advance our impact priorities. So, how to spend their money in a way that creates economic opportunity. How to garden, build relationships with neighbors and kids.

00;08;09;09 - 00;08;37;29

So, that their gardening pursuit fosters social connection. How to, you know, convert to edible or edimental gardening so that they're nurturing the food supply. And that's actually been the hardest conceptual link. But we do that through education presentation. You know, who we invite to speak, what we write about, etc. The second big thrust is, showcasing the most compelling people, practices and ideas about using horticulture to advance health and well-being.

00;08;38;01 - 00;09;02;06

And that's primarily the job of the flower show. So, we've worked really hard to evolve the mix of exhibitors in the show so that they're not just great practitioners of horticulture, they're also people whose ethos and career reflects this commitment to using horticulture to positive impact in health and well-being. The third is, we operate 20 public gardens and landscapes and public spaces around the region.

00;09;02;06 - 00;09;26;20

So literally bringing horticulture into people's day to day living environment and then activating it in ways that nurture social connection and food production. A really good example that I kind of love was in 2020, we promoted food gardening at home, and we built a whole network of food pantries that would receive homegrown produce and set up a education system to educate people.

00;09;26;23 - 00;09;44;21

But we also took Logan Circle, which is one of our iconic landscapes, and planted it as an edimental garden that season. So, this is like the most important kind of ornamental landscape in Philadelphia. But it was edimental and it was super cool to like, show just, you know, teach by doing. And then the fourth is our work with neighborhoods.

00;09;44;21 - 00;10;09;00

So, we support 230 some neighborhoods around the region in community gardening or urban farming, tree planting and stewardship, green job training, green stormwater infrastructure and vacant land management. And that's a whole range of services that range from supporting volunteers to working with businesses to, actually, you know, take care of sites and, and build healthy neighborhoods.

Anastasia: Awesome. That's so exciting.

00;10;09;00 - 00;10;28;28

Anastasia: You all are doing so much.

Matt: A lot.

Anastasia: Yeah. So, I think one thing that's coming to mind for me is like, from all of these things that you're doing, what are some of the positive outcomes that you're seeing as a result?

Matt: Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, some of these things are easy to measure. Some of them are quite hard.

00;10;28;28 - 00;11;05;18

So, on the most measurable outcome, we've had really robust research from University of Pennsylvania on our vacant land cleaning and greening work. So we, we care for, with our partners, 13,000 vacant lots across Philadelphia. And we maintain them as park-like spaces. And that work has been studied over time, randomized control trial, and found 30, almost 30% reduction in gun violence and something like 70, 70, 75% reduction in self-reported feelings of depression and worthlessness.

00;11;05;21 - 00;11;37;23

So, incredibly transformative impact at scale across the city at really marginal cost compared to other interventions. We also see—so that that's like the most tangible data—for other areas. We look to referential data from other cities around how tree planting, encourages—it creates safety, encourages people to walk and socialize outdoor with neighbors more. And then we use that to drive investment and growth in our Tree Tenders program.

00;11;37;23 - 00;12;08;14

That engages people to plant and care for trees in their neighborhoods. And we also do it in a deeply volunteer intensive way. So, it builds the social connections as well. So, it's not just about getting trees in the ground, but, but nurturing, social connections. And I think probably the most qualitative but interesting evidence is we've been quite successful in drawing in kind of next generation of volunteers continuously.

00;12;08;16 - 00;12;43;09

And we see people enter the organization through the pop-up gardens or through tree planting or through community gardening, and then they become passionate home gardeners, and then they become flower show volunteers. And you keep seeing this, this renewal, and even in the flower show itself—you know, one of the most incredible dimensions that people don't know is it's this huge community of people who have met one another and found common passion by exhibiting in the show, and they become one another's, you know, year-round community.

00;12;43;11 - 00;13;04;28

And the show has both people have been doing it for 50 years, and then we've got people in their 30s who are becoming the largest exhibitors and building these whole new communities of support

around them. So that that fact that we continue to draw people in tells me that we're winning at the social connections, impact priority.

00;13;05;01 - 00;13;08;12

Anastasia: Yeah. It seems like it's growing for sure.

00;13;08;12 - 00;13;31;10

So, we've talked a lot about what you're doing and, and kind of this new direction—or not so new direction—but what are even some of the challenges that you've encountered along the way?

Matt: You know, for, for all of us in nonprofit world, the last, you know, 5 to 8 years have been really complicated in lots of ways.

00;13;31;12 - 00;13;56;16

And for PHS, I think because we had invested in the visioning before Covid and had just adopted a compelling vision, we really went through the pandemic with a very high level of energy and kind of confronted the challenges head on and did huge things like took the flower show outside for two years, scaled our vacant land program, scaled our, tree programs.

00;13;56;18 - 00;14;21;13

But the flip side of that is just organizational growth is, is hard. So PHS is 30% larger than it was in 2020 financially and, and staff-wise. And that's a lot of growing pains, right? Figuring out how systems evolve. Culture evolves. And doing that in a time when people are, you know, scattered all over the Earth and, dealing with immense stresses in the world amplifies it.

00;14;21;13 - 00;14;49;11

So, I think just working through organizational growth has been a big challenge. The second is inherent to nonprofit work, except when you're dependent on ticket gate revenue, your revenue streams are really lumpy, right? So, you can get a significant grant or contract to grow a program, and then it can disappear two years later. And we've worked hard to avoid those cliffs because we want to be a reliable partner to the communities we serve.

00;14;49;13 - 00;15;10;12

But that creates a lot of work and stress on the back end to think about before we enter into a new relationship with the community, a new service line, we really have to be sure that we have a sustainable model to support it, which can slow you down and really force you to think, think carefully.

00;15;10;14 - 00;15;39;16

And then, I think the third is just in, in any, any sense, working in the civic realm right now is really challenging. People are fraught emotions. People are polarized in every dimension. As we know, people are kind of fed up. I often say people both crave leadership and completely reject leadership right now. And so, it's just a complicated time to work, work out there in in the space that is between all of us, and brings us together.

00;15;42;22 - 00;16;10;10

Anastasia: Well, in kind of thinking about that, what are the new opportunities that you're seeing on the horizon?

Matt: So, we've had a really exciting kind of year and a half, which is, Philadelphia got a new mayor, Cherelle Parker, back in, 2024. And Mayor Parker brought to the city a central focus on creating, the cleanest, greenest, safest big city in America with economic opportunity for all.

00;16;10;13 - 00;16;35;05

Matt: And it literally felt like the mayor of a major city adopting our mission, and, and really saw us as a key partner to help do that. So, we've had really exciting evolution in our neighborhood work. We've been able to—the vacant lots we managed, historically we cleaned and greened during the growing season, but we're able to extend that year-round.

Anastasia: Oh wow!

Matt: Which has a huge impact on employment and business and neighborhood health.

00;16;35;07 - 00;17;07;08

We've grown our workforce development program. So, we'll graduate almost 100 green job trainees this year, and we'll place 90% or more of them in full time employment, hugely transformative for people. We've seen real interest in urban trees. In Philadelphia and elsewhere. And so, we've worked with partners to try to scale both tree planting and long-term care of the urban canopy, with a focus on getting to a point where we see trees as kind of core infrastructure rather than just nice to haves.

00;17;07;10 - 00;17;33;19

So, there's a lot of, a lot of energy, and then we're completely energized right now because PHS turns 200 in 2027, and we're organizing ourselves around the next strategic plan and fundraising campaign, to really say, who do we want to be as we enter our third century? Like, what are the big ideas? And we're looking at our role in public spaces and horticulture in the city.

00;17;33;19 - 00;17;54;08

We're looking at our geographic footprint. We're looking at our relationship to home gardeners via education and membership. And there's just a lot of energy to imagine. For such a vital organization and such a tangible discipline as horticulture is, what can we do, to enter that third century with even more energy than we've ever had?

00;17;54;10 - 00;18;33;12

Anastasia: Awesome. Well, I think the the last question I have for you is, are there any key learnings or insights that you would like to share with other garden leaders?

Matt: I have two, so one is that as nonprofit leaders, we hold civic capital. That's our balance sheet. That's the trust and relationships. That's the site that we manage. And I personally believe that our job is to do as much with that, to benefit society at large as is possible.

00;18;33;14 - 00;19;03;06

And I think adopting that mindset opens up an energy and a creativity that is unmatched. And so really owning and loving and leaning into that role as holders of capital that belongs to everybody, and thinking about how you can use it to benefit everybody is a different mindset than just the core responsibility of caring for your site or your collection.

00;19;03;08 - 00;19;40;03

But I think it's the place where nonprofit organizations move from, you know, sort of slow and steady to like, dynamic and exciting and inherently it makes you more inclusive because people sense that you're trying to serve them, and they want to be part of it. So that's one. Two is, I think that horticulture is probably the most attainable of the cultural disciplines.

00;19;40;03 - 00;20;08;11

If you think about it, this way and the most accessible. And people—if you think of the audience of like a major orchestra—the vast majority of people are not musicians. They're there for the social ritual to listen to the music. Whatever reason. In horticulture, you're often speaking to people who practice your discipline in in some way, and that brings a completely different level of passion, connection and curiosity.

00;20;08;13 - 00;20;32;12

And it's also a discipline, as somebody has pointed out to me, that everybody experiences in their own way. So, a parent and a child, a person with learning differences or physical differences, they will all find a way to enjoy a garden. Right? And it's not like a parent has to attend the kids exhibition. It's like they're just literally in the garden and they're going to connect with it in their way and do it together.

00;20;32;14 - 00;21;06;16

So really embracing, celebrating, appreciating, that this this is an amazing discipline that anybody can, can get involved in with very low barriers to entry. And people inherently have, you know, stories related to it, traditions from grandparents and, and, and connecting in that way. So, taking yourself off any sense of a stage and really speaking as if you're speaking to peers with every visitor or member of the public you encounter, changes their life and makes your institution relevant and, and, and dynamic.

00;21;06;24 - 00;21;18;07

Anastasia: Matt, thank you so much for talking with me today. It's been such a pleasure to learn more about the ways that PHS advancing health and well-being through horticulture. I can't help but feel inspired after talking with you today.

00;21;18;07 - 00;21;26;05

Matt: I appreciate you asking. And, thank you to Longwood and the Fellows for taking on this important project.

00;21;26;05 - 00;21;37;12

Yvette: Thank you so much for tuning in to today's episode. A special thanks to Longwood Gardens for their incredible support and for making this conversation possible.

00;21;37;12 - 00;21;48;11

Anastasia: This podcast has been produced by Carol Gross, Mariah Kaltenstein, Laurel Dunning, Vânia Pereira, Anastasia Sallen, Clare Shearman, and Yvette Weaver.

00;21;48;11 - 00;21;57;13

Yvette: If you're interested in learning more about the 2024 Fellows Project and Workbook, there are links in the show notes with more information.

00;21;57;16 - 00;22;12;04

The Longwood Fellows Program is a unique leader development program in the fields of public horticulture. Until next time, keep your hands in the soil, your heart full and be inspired by gardens.