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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.

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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.

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Hello, I'm Clare Shearman with the Longwood Gardens Fellows program.

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I have the pleasure of speaking with Jennifer Riley Chetwynd, the Director of Marketing and Social Responsibility at Denver Botanic Gardens, where she leads programs and partnerships with a strong focus on community and sustainability.

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Jennifer is recognized leader in water sustainability with impact at the local, national and global levels.

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She serves on the board of Alliance with Water Efficiency and is co-organizer of the International Water Forum at the United Nations.

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She brings a wealth of experience and insight and I'm super excited to learn more about the people centered work happening at Denver Botanic Gardens.

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Hi, Jennifer.

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Hello.

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How long has Denver Botanic Gardens been in existence then? Since 1951. Oh, wow. Okay, so that's really interesting. And is it located in Denver itself? Because I'm quite naive to where it actually is. We are a multi-site location and our primary site is within the city and County of Denver, very close to the downtown area.

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And that's our primary site where most, offices and employees are located. However, we have a significant second site, which is more an agricultural and agro attainment site. Which is in, suburb or a kind of a peri urban location just outside of the city limits and in, another county, Jefferson County.

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So how large is the garden and and how many, how many staff do you have? So, like, geographically or in terms of full time equivalent. So, so how large is the garden? And it's, I mean, okay, so if you've got multiple sites, I suspect that's quite hard to, decipher.

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Is it? So is it done per site? Well, no, it's institutional and institutionally at our, you know, high point throughout the year, we have about 350 full time equivalent, staff. And that's pretty constant, constant, around, you know, throughout the year, it might be a little lower in the winter, a little higher in the summer, but the 350 full time equivalents is approximate.

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And then geographically, our urban Denver location is 24 acres. And our agricultural location is 700 acres. Not all of that farmed about 20 acres of that is farmed. And the rest is like, nature. Preserve and, like ecological restoration.

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Okay. So next I've got, kind of two high level questions.

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Before diving into the specifics of your, garden in Denver. So it's just about how do you define social sustainability in the public garden context? It's, just being really keen to hear from you what your thoughts are. Well, I guess I would equate social sustainability

and social responsibility, even though that may not be how you're equating it.

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But, I actually justified the creation of, social responsibility function and department here soon after arriving, and it was based on the corporate social responsibility model that you often see in a for profit environment. And just because we work in a nonprofit space, I didn't think there was any reason not to be intentional about it. Even more so, I'd say then in a for profit place, you want to be intentional about those three, legs of the stool, aligning the financial, the people, and the environmental.

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So, the social sustainability, I'd say, is probably in my mind a subset of social responsibility, which might be the larger, you know, three legged stool of environment people and, business so specific to people and social sustainability. I think it's, you know, both inward and outward looking. You know, we are housed, you know, in marketing. So we're really taking an external look on social sustainability.

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But I do think there's an equally important role that is probably more so in HR function, which is internal, sustainability. Yeah. I could speak most knowledgeably to external facing social responsibility social sustainability initiatives. Yeah. And that's that is really interesting as we has been

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sort of again, trying to sort of split them between,

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internal and external, but also those crossovers that kind of also happen.

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Yeah. On a community side of things. So, yeah. Fascinating. And so what is the role of social sustainability in the field of horticulture and public gardens, do you think? Well, I think again, and this is an external orientation that I'm bringing to it. But I think it's removing barriers of access is our number one priority and making sure that all of the programing we have here finds its audience and a varied audience, and realizing not everything is for everyone, but

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fulfilling a commitment of truly having something for any potential audience out there.

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So, you know that that really comes down to, you know, always looking at where our programming gaps are, where, you know, seeing what hurdles people have to engaging with us. I think our best example of trying to and I some of these answers, I may jump down, they may touch on future questions. So I don't know.

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Yeah. That's okay. Totally fine. Okay. So I guess I would pair this the role of social sustainability with the next question. How do we work toward greater social sustainability? It's removing those barriers to access. Like about ten years ago, we identified transportation as a major hurdle to to, you know, plugging in here on site at our primary location and even more so at our rural location.

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So we created a, shuttle program that would provide free transportation and admission to, you know, community groups, organizations, you know, not school, school age children. We kind of have covered, you know, working with public schools and private schools and even home schools. We have a solid education program. This is more community access and engagement. So this is now one it's a ninth probably year.

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The shuttle program, it's quite robust. What started as just providing transportation and bringing people here and saying enjoy has now, kind of had, many layers added to it. That engagement could be here or it could be off site. So, you know, transportation is overcome as a hurdle either by bringing people here through, you know, providing bus transportation or Lyft credits.

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Lyft and Uber credits, to get people here if they're not all coming from one original location. But then also free admission, free programming, tailored programs like, let's say if we're dealing with a sensory audience, you know, has sensory issues, then we make sure we have horticultural therapists involved and we have, you know, special you know, consideration for those needs or language like, a group that's bilingual, predominantly Spanish speaking.

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We'll make sure that we have Spanish speaking guides. We do, bilingual yoga. We do a lot of health and wellness programs. So, so it's it's become quite robust and quite tailored to what the needs are. That's really interesting. So the with the, like the shuttle, what prompted that then to become an initiative that you were going to take?

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A barrier a hurdle. Yeah. We're well, we're urban. Denver is not like London. It doesn't have a fabulous public transport system. Yeah. And I say this, having lived six years in London is right. It's a real bummer. Our public transport system here. So you have no right to complain about your system. There. It's it's really tricky to use public transportation.

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The, the, the modes are not it is multimodal, but it's not integrated, you know, so you may take a bus and that the transfer isn't timed well or the light rail doesn't really connect with the it. It's really tricky. You can spend just a lot of time trying to get from point A to point B. So that was the primary issue we we started out to address.

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What's not just on your own kind of observations, or did you have any kind of data analysis with that with that. So it was qualitative analysis of a group, of board members and staff. We have a standing, idea is how we refer to diversity, equity, inclusion.

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So and an idea is something we've been committed to for a while. And we've had a standing board committee that focuses on idea issues. And this came out of, one of those, board committee meetings, you know, like what hurdles can we address? And someone said transportation. And then soon after that, someone said, well, let's provide transportation.

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Then let's figure out how we do that. And it snowballed pretty quickly to, you know, obviously we hadn't budgeted for that for the year. And we found a funder who was like looking for a place to put their funds, you know, to

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and it really kickstarted that, that program.

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And it's grown every year. And we now have a named funder who, who, underwrites that program.

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So with regards of processes, then, when you're initiating something and designing something to and how do you like gain support for that and what was the process like?

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Well, I remember, you know, this board idea community has been really integral. And a lot of our approach to social responsibility or social, sustainability.

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So board influence has been tremendous because when our CEO started here 17 years ago, his priority was board diversification. And that has made all the difference because it we really rely on them to introduce us to new audiences.

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So I mean, as much as we rely on staff and, you know, funders and community partners and, but, the board has been really instrumental in making these introductions. And when, when we first started the shuttle program, we had this great idea. We had money behind it. We just started cold calling and nobody wanted to get on the bus, literally.

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And the lesson learned was, okay. Yeah. Why would someone want to come somewhere they didn't know? Didn't feel comfortable, you know? So you need that connector. And so now the woman who's now on board chair, she is very active in the Asian American, community and is Asian. And she connected us to a, Asian organization here. And then it was a breakthrough because then it was a trust in, you know, connector, connecting her community to the gardens.

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And that's just repeated itself again and again without that trusted connector. Yeah. In fact, tragically, like just in the last few weeks.

And I don't want to get too political here, but the realities are we do have a backlash against idea. Yes. Climate advocacy. We had some events over the weekend, again targeting what we call the AAPI community Asian-American, Pacific Islander, community with Lunar New Year celebrations.

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One group of shuttle participants, 30 people didn't show up because they they just felt like they had a target on their back. That's not okay. But now I need those that says, okay, we have to adapt. So now we're thinking about, okay, if there's fear out there, which there there is. You know, we have evidence and there's evidence of that.

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Well, then we need to figure out how we go to them. How do we meet them where they're comfortable, and they don't feel like they're taking a risk to engage. Yeah. Yeah. And it it's it's very interesting and eye opening since, this project was born to so now and how, you know, in the flick of a switch and things can change.

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But you're right as well in, you know, pivoting or, you know, adapting and, you know, when there's a will, there's a way kind of saying, yeah, and it's, you know, when a door closes, a window opens, hopefully. Yeah. You know, we just have to sign more windows. Yeah. That's right. So we've already, talked a little bit about, people,

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people involved and how important that is.

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But how about

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engaging various other stakeholders so, you know, who was involved and how do you how did that kind of go about, so.

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I mean, so we had the connectors through our board and staff, you know, pulling in their own communities.

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But then we had, you know, once that connection was made with a community organization, usually they're a grassroots organization catering to or serving, you know, a particular group that could be, an ethnic or religious group. It could be, an affinity group. It could be, in some cases, religious groups. It could be, I mean, like, so we've just have built this, this base of community partners, and we have probably a little over 200 community partners.

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And some of them we just send information to and we we offer free tickets and access to, to events or admission throughout the year. But others, maybe they participate in the in a free shuttle program. You know, and it really it runs the gamut. But that that shuttle program was what busted the doors open and yeah, really give us an excuse to communicate with with community organizations.

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And yeah, I'd say if I were characterizing who's in this mix of community groups, a lot who serve refugees and immigrants, seniors, folks with specific health challenges or conditions like sensory issues or, mobility issues.

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So were there any I mean, were there any challenges and roadblocks that you kind of came across as you moved through this? The first one was realizing without a connector, you don't, you know, you might as well be shouting into the wind. So that that was the most important lesson learned. Even though we knew it was a great product and a great opportunity.

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And, you know, if it didn't resonate with them or they didn't trust it, then it didn't mean anything. And then the second point of pivoting when things change, I think is important. Yeah. I think the also probably knowing what we can manage and offer in a consistent quality way, you know, we got to the point where we were probably bending over backwards to tailor too much.

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So we kind of had to kind of swing back and figure out form 90% of the partners. What is the menu that is going to be most appealing? And then not to say we can't go off menu. But I think staff is a constraint. Staff is definitely a constraint. And so when our staff shrunk through a departure, and then in the period where we were trying to justify refilling that position and hiring more people, you



know, we just kind of you you have fits and starts.

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You kind of have to shrink the the services, the volume that you're providing before you can expand it again.

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and so obviously it sounds like a really, you know, great example actually, for us, but I am measuring, now and evaluating the impact of, of that, from the, you know, from you obviously had a benchmark to start with because I wasn't, wasn't even there.

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So how do you how are you going around that? So we, we quantify how many people are served every year and, you know, through shuttle programing and tailored, you know, shuttle access and transportation access and programing and, we're serving about, 4000 people. But then if we count, you know, free tickets and free admission, the number is closer to about 12,000 a year.

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One thing that we're doing this year, and this is the first, we will have done this. We've done isolated reports, like, for instance, we have our urban food initiatives, which is, a type of access program trying to provide, fresh produce from our farm location to food deserts and underserved communities where they don't have ready access to, to fresh produce, and over the years, again, it's been about a decade long quest.

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You know, it started with, farm stands where we're selling direct to people at, like, government housing, agencies as partners or at like government services offices where people come to pay their utility bills or get guidance on, you know, myriad issues. And we'd have pop up farm stands there, that we found, especially when we had Covid, it just it wasn't sustainable.

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And it was like, so small and fractured the impact. So now we grow more food than ever. But but donate it through, you know, trusted partners again like food bank. Yes. And cafes, restaurants. So, so over the last few years, we've put together like a summary report on how many people served, how many partners, you know, some anecdotes.

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And now we're expanding that to about eight impact programs. You know, ranging from food to global initiatives, you know, initiatives that impact audiences outside the United States and developing world, environments, primarily, water. We I run, water center with a local university. So a lot of our work focuses on water scarcity issues in agriculture specifically.

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So we're putting together an impact report that tries to capture, you know, each program's impact. And sometimes that's qualitative and sometimes it's quantitative. Both. Yeah. Yeah. And, and again, that's like the, for instance, the, the shuttle thing, I mean, you, you've got, an ideal there because it's a, if it's a ticketed thing, it's kind of, you know, easy to like, easy to get the mission.

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Yeah, yeah. So, yeah. So that's because this is one of the things I think also is quite challenging is to, with, some of the social sustainability initiatives as to how to measure, those, those kind of things. And, you know, especially if it's people's well-being. It's, you know, another thing to try and measure.

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is there anything you think that you've learned or key learnings and insights that you'd be, really keen to share with, other leaders so that other garden leaders that you can actually really think is a key point to bring? I think one interesting journey, an epiphany that I've had, is.

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Whether you're viewing it as a conflict or a complement, revenue goals and impact goals, and I think for for a nonprofit organization, we we are run by earned revenue. I mean, ticket membership events, like we need to bring in earned revenue. But, you know, we're not trying to make a profit either. So, you know, we need to serve the community as well.

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And I referenced trying to, bring on, you know, new people to fill a vacancy. And what was the departure of one person we wanted to justify is the hiring of two new people. Okay. And I did, return on investment analysis, which seems kind of heartless to do in a social sustainability context. However, it it it did.

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It came down to a lot more than dollars and cents. It really came down to, you know, making this place feel like it belongs to everyone. So if we have more bandwidth to have more shuttle programs or give away more free tickets or create programming free of charge, eventually it's training the pump. I mean, that is going to be our new audience.

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I think often we approach, you know, this as charity or, you know, sure. I mean, yes, it's it can start with giving access to those, you know, who who financially, you know, might have more of a hurdle than, than others. But down the road it's belonging and it's community and true social sustainability is that. Yes. Yeah. Yeah.

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I love that and it really does. Yeah. It speaks to, to me a lot of that kind of, thought pattern, particularly sense of belonging and making sure that, you know, open spaces are for, you know, all for everyone. And that sense of that, everyone does feel that sense of belonging. And that's really important.

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we are because of the APGa is, sort of very much with their index been, guided by, by that. But again, we're looking and, and similar to yourself.

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So you described it with, with the three sort of the three links, really an understanding that there's the, the, the people side of things. And I think that that's where we're, gravitating towards it's that, because you need people for everything, you know, and there's people connecting with plants, which is what we're all about. But also the whole people side of, you can't have the plants without the people.

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And and so it goes on this, this journey, and how important we are, you know, each and every one, yeah. In the industry, but also, thinking broader than that, the community and, and that kind of thing. So community and education in that, so, so very much so it's sort of defining, that social scientists out of that, sort of that people.

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And that's what we really want it to be about. In those many different ways. So again, like thinking about, that external approach, but also the internal approaches, of sustaining and we're, we're constantly talking about sort of succession planning. And how do you then, sustain people. You know, in, in, in, in this industry.

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So, you know, you know, you got to provide, the place of, of belonging, at work as well, as so it and I love that sense of belonging because I, and also myself, I, you know, I've been away, on my journey,

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and I've lost myself about your journey. Yeah. So I, I have been, I've come from New Zealand.

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In, Wellington. So I'm a plant collections team manager in Wellington Botanic Garden. And so I've embarked on my journey, to long works for the fellows program. And I've left my husband and my ten year old son in, in New Zealand. Oh, my gosh.

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But, so I think back to my journey.

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And now, you know, we're six months in and it's been challenging, and just talking about belonging and, and I went home for Christmas and, and it just came over me in this wave of like, well, this is where I belong.

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And it's really interesting because I'm from the UK originally, so I hear I was going to say, you know, what do we Kiwi. So and so here I am back in my home town.

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You know, I was from London. I'm from London, from south London. So, you know, back in it, although I've been away for 15 years, it's like coming and coming back home in some ways. But it's not home. It's not where my heart is. And my heart is, is, in New Zealand. So I think for me, my journey and, and then feeling this sense of like, there's this

project that we're taking on and I'm very much thinking about that sense of belonging.

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I think, when we're talking about sense of belonging and trying to create not only a workplace, but, a green space for everyone.

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And, and it really is, you know, really interesting, from my perspective as well.

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that's been very enjoyable.

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I think you've, Yeah. You you guys, really hit quite a few of the some initiatives that I think would be really, Yeah. Really interesting to explore further, actually. So, thank you so much. Oh, my pleasure. And and

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Yeah, really appreciate your, your insights. And I think it's we're going to really look forward to being in Denver as well. And I enjoy it.

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I'm, It's a pleasure chatting with you, Claire.

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but again, you know, thank you so much. We really do appreciate it. And it is a record.

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So thank you for contacting me and enjoy your coffee in your own flat like

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That's wonderful. So let's take yours. Bye bye for now. Bye.

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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.

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00;30;03;22 – 00;30;05;10

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

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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 heartful and be inspired by gardens.