

Longwood Gardens
Fellows Program

Guide

Rooted in People

The Human Side of Public Gardens





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Introduction

Why Social Sustainability? Why Now?

Across all sectors, social sustainability is gaining prominence as organizations recognize the importance of centering people alongside environmental and economic concerns.

In a world reshaped by the pandemic and urgent calls for equity and inclusion, public gardens are at a pivotal moment to redefine what sustainability means. While gardens have long excelled in environmental practices—like composting, recycling, integrated pest management, and adopting cleaner power tools—sustainability must also address the well-being of the people who sustain these places. Thriving, resilient communities and organizations depend on acknowledging and supporting the physical, emotional, and social well-being of employees and the broader public. Today, that commitment is no longer optional—it is essential.

The growing emphasis on people-centered practices reflects a deeper, enduring value: organizations thrive when people thrive. In 2019, nearly 90% of companies on the S&P 500 index published a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) report, compared to just 20% in 2011. ¹

This shift is not a trend—it's a recognition that investing in human well-being is fundamental to institutional success and sustainability.

People Are at the Heart of What We Do

The success of public gardens is fundamentally dependent on the passion, expertise, and commitment of the people involved, whether they are paid staff, volunteers, or community members. As organizational leaders, we recognize that people are at the heart of what we do. It is therefore essential that we nurture and care for the individuals who dedicate their time and effort to supporting, experiencing, and enhancing these spaces for the future. The gardens we lead play an essential role in promoting social sustainability.

The 2024–2025 Longwood Fellows (The Fellows) developed this guide to provide both a deeper understanding of social sustainability in the public garden field and an actionable plan to support gardens at any stage of their journey.



Public gardens across the globe are beginning to prioritize social sustainability by weaving it into their strategic frameworks. The following case studies offer real-world examples of how gardens are embracing this shift.

Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI)

On a global scale, BGCI reinforces an interconnected approach. Its mission—to “mobilize botanic gardens and engage partners in securing plant diversity for the well-being of people and the planet”—places human well-being on equal footing with conservation goals.²

Together, these examples highlight a growing recognition in the public garden sector: social sustainability is a core strategy for building strong, inclusive, and future-ready institutions.

Desert Botanical Garden (DBG)

Out west, DBG in Arizona has taken a similarly intentional approach. Its strategic plan, *Sustainability: The Triple Bottom Line* (2019–2025), integrates environmental, economic, and social pillars. DBG’s IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility) initiatives demonstrate its commitment to creating a culture where all visitors and staff feel valued, welcomed, and engaged.³

Longwood Gardens

Longwood Gardens has a long-standing tradition of caring for both its people and its community. That legacy dates to founder Pierre S. du Pont, who, during the 1918 Spanish Influenza pandemic, donated one million dollars to establish a hospital—now Chester County Hospital—after losing an employee, Lewes A. Mason, to the flu.⁴

Today, that spirit of care is a cornerstone of Longwood’s 2030 Strategic Plan, which outlines goals to “engage and delight guests from all demographics” and foster an inclusive, innovative workplace culture. The plan’s people goals are anchored in three pillars: workforce, workplace, and safety and well-being.⁵

Longwood’s workforce development efforts—including a strong onboarding experience, leadership cultivation through the “Leading at Longwood” program, and partnerships with local institutions like Williamson College of the Trades—demonstrate a sustained investment in its people. As Sharon Loving, Chief Horticulture and Facilities Officer, notes, “Our long-standing relationship with Williamson College of the Trades is indicative of Longwood’s commitment to engaging young people with careers in horticulture.”⁶

The Fellows have observed firsthand how Longwood Gardens brings these values to life through its programs and culture, reflecting a holistic approach to social sustainability that keeps people at the center.

The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG)

NYBG’s newly launched strategic plan, *Branching Out: A Strategic Plan for 2024–2030*, was shaped over 15 months with input from more than 500 staff and trustees. One of the five key strategic initiatives—Bronx Forward—demonstrates NYBG’s deep commitment to its surrounding community, focusing on improving health, well-being, and economic opportunity.⁷

Signature programs include:⁷

- Bronx Green-Up: horticulture education and greening projects led by and for residents.
- Bronx Neighbors Program: free admission for locals.
- Career Pathways: internships, youth development, and workforce training opportunities.

Through Bronx Forward, NYBG exemplifies the power of cultural institutions to advance community well-being and social equity for its 1.4 million Bronx neighbors.⁷

About This Guide

This guide and workbook were developed to bring renewed attention to social sustainability, help public garden leaders develop new social sustainability initiatives, and deepen their existing commitment to social sustainability principles and practices. This resource is designed to be useful for gardens of any size and budget, encouraging readers to assess their current state, envision their desired future, and align operations with the evolving demands of a changing world. Recognizing that human and financial resources are often limiting factors for public garden initiatives, the tools in this handbook seek to help readers identify priorities and think creatively about overcoming the obstacles they may face.

Inside, you will find:

- Clear definitions of sustainability and social sustainability
- Survey insights from garden professionals
- Links to case study interviews highlighting real-world examples
- Tools to help your team assess current efforts and build an actionable plan

Our goal is to equip you with the mindset and resources to lead social sustainability efforts that reflect your community's needs and your organization's unique strengths. Together, we can cultivate gardens that are both environmentally and financially sound as well as socially resilient and just.



Explore the full project via this QR code or by visiting longwoodgardens.org/cohort-project/2025.

Defining Social Sustainability

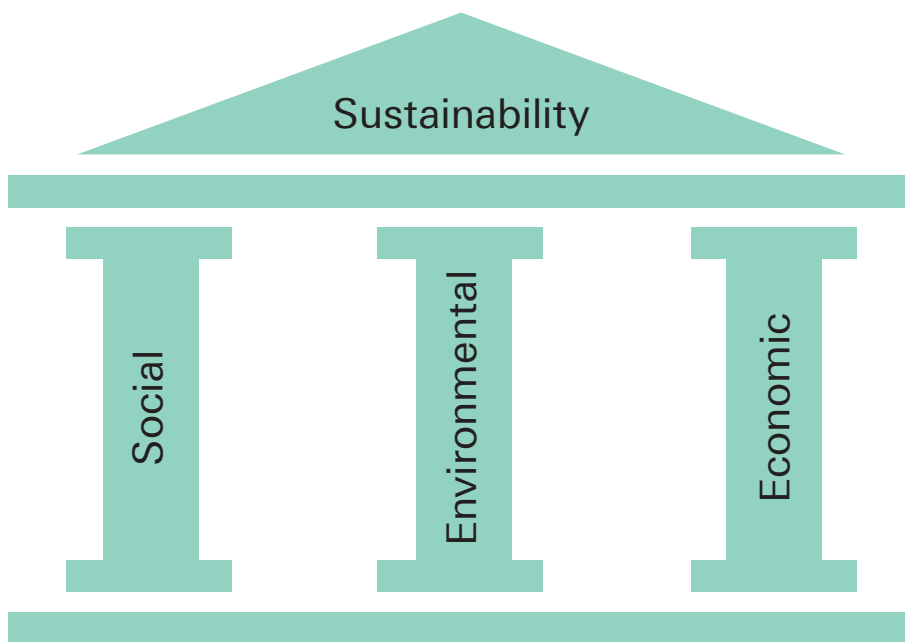
A Brief Historical Overview

Sustainability is a term rooted in horticulture, coined by German forester Hans Carl von Carlowitz in 1713. In his publication *Sylvicultura Oeconomica*, he introduced his concept of “sustainable yield,” which outlined the importance of harvesting only the timber that is needed.⁸

Fast forward to 1972 when an influential article titled “A Blueprint for Survival” was published by *The Economist* magazine, ahead of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. This article expanded Carlowitz’s sustainable yield concept beyond forestry to all natural resources for our planet to be able to support future generations.¹⁰ In 2012, Bethany Hubbard wrote in the *Ecologist*, A Blueprint for Survival “was a catalyst for political change,” selling over 500,000 copies.⁹

The 1992 United Nations’ Earth Summit conference unveiled the Rio Declaration in which the term sustainability came to mean meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Rio Declaration identified three **interconnected dimensions of sustainability—social, environmental, and economic**—which scholars have reaffirmed over time. These three dimensions are commonly called the **Three Pillars of Sustainability**, providing a visual metaphor for balancing the needs of people, the planet, and prosperity to ensure a sustainable future.¹⁰

The Three Pillars of Sustainability¹¹



Note. Adapted from "Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins," by B. Purvis, Y. Mao, and D. Robinson, 2019, Sustainability Science 14, p. 682. (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0627-5>). CC BY 4.0.

Focus on Social Sustainability

Although the balance and interdependent relationship among all three pillars of sustainability is pivotal for long-term resilience and success, this project is focused specifically on **social sustainability**.

Social sustainability focuses on supporting people's and communities' well-being and quality of life for present and future generations.

The Role of Public Gardens

In public horticulture, this means cultivating connections and creating inclusive spaces where people can explore, grow, and thrive together. Just as we care and advocate for our botanical collections, it is vital that we extend the same level of care and advocacy to the horticulturists who steward them and the communities that benefit from them.

Public gardens have fueled great progress in the last thirty years by increasingly incorporating concepts related to sustainability into their missions and strategic plans. In 2016 the American Public Garden Association (APGA) released its Public Garden Sustainability Index, a tool outlining environmental, economic, and social sustainability attributes.¹²

Now, nearly a decade later, The Fellows collected further data to see how public gardens have advanced their efforts in the realm of social sustainability.

“Social sustainability is not just a buzzword or a passing trend—it is essential for the long-term success of any public garden.”






— Marnie Conley, Chief Experience and Brand Officer, Longwood Gardens

APGA's Public Gardens Sustainability Index Attributes¹²

Environmental	Social	Economic
Biodiversity & Conservation	Health & Well-being	Local/Regional Economic Health
Water Quality & Consumption	Sustainable Community Development	Strategic Planning, Design, and Governance
Energy Use & Impacts	Engagement, Outreach, & Education	Business Planning & Management
Materials Management	Employee Development, Diversity, & Inclusion	Climate Adaptation & Risk Management

Note. Adapted from "Public Gardens Sustainability Index" by American Public Gardens Association. (<https://www.publicgardens.org/sustainability-index/>).

To align survey work with APGA's index¹², The Fellows chose to focus on five attributes related to social sustainability:

-  Health & Well-being
-  Accessibility
-  Sustainable Community Development
-  Engagement, Outreach, & Education
-  Employee Development, Diversity, & Inclusion

Note. These social sustainability attributes are adapted from "Public Gardens Sustainability Index" by American Public Gardens Association. (<https://www.publicgardens.org/sustainability-index/>). One additional attribute was added: accessibility. These attributes are used throughout this Guide.

Social Sustainability in Public Horticulture: Research Results

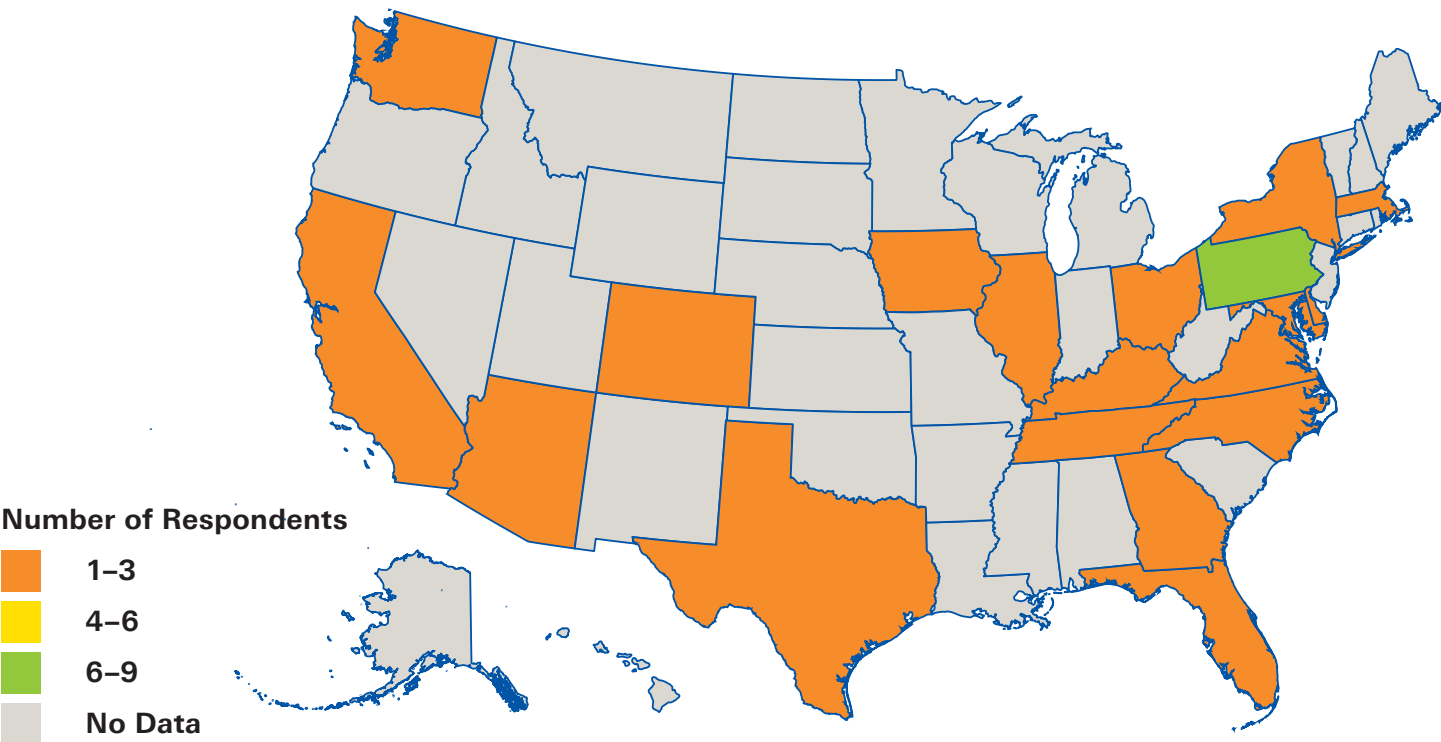
The Fellows designed a survey to understand the industry's current familiarity and perspectives on social sustainability. Specifically, it explored what types of social sustainability initiatives are currently being deployed or developed—or not. Additionally, the survey results illuminate the challenges organizations face and the opportunities available for further development. In December 2024, the survey was deployed to 159 gardens in the United States, United Kingdom, Singapore, and New Zealand.

Methodology

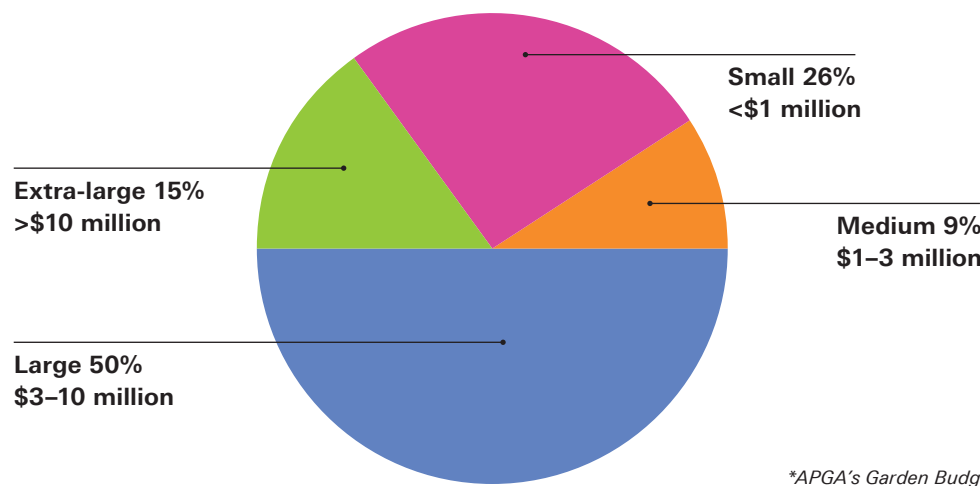
The survey was designed to gather quantitative data (22 questions) and qualitative perspectives (11 questions based on open-ended responses). The 50 survey respondents reflect a diverse array of organizational types, including botanical gardens, historic estates, cemeteries, university campuses, and arboretums. Geographically, the data encompasses 41 organizations located in the US, as well as organizations in the United Kingdom, Singapore, and New Zealand.

Participating gardens ranged in staff size, acreage, revenue models (e.g., paid versus free admission), locality (rural, urban, and suburban), and longevity (including both newer establishments and long-standing institutions). Considering APGA's garden budget size categories, half of respondents can be defined as large public gardens (budget between \$3–10 million), followed by small gardens (budget up to \$1 million) with 26% of responses. According to APGA benchmark data for fiscal year 2023 (based on 89 garden respondents), our survey participants reflect the overall composition of the garden industry, as the median garden budget size falls into the larger gardens category with an annual budget of \$3.4 million.

US Survey Participants by State



Survey Participants by Budget Size*

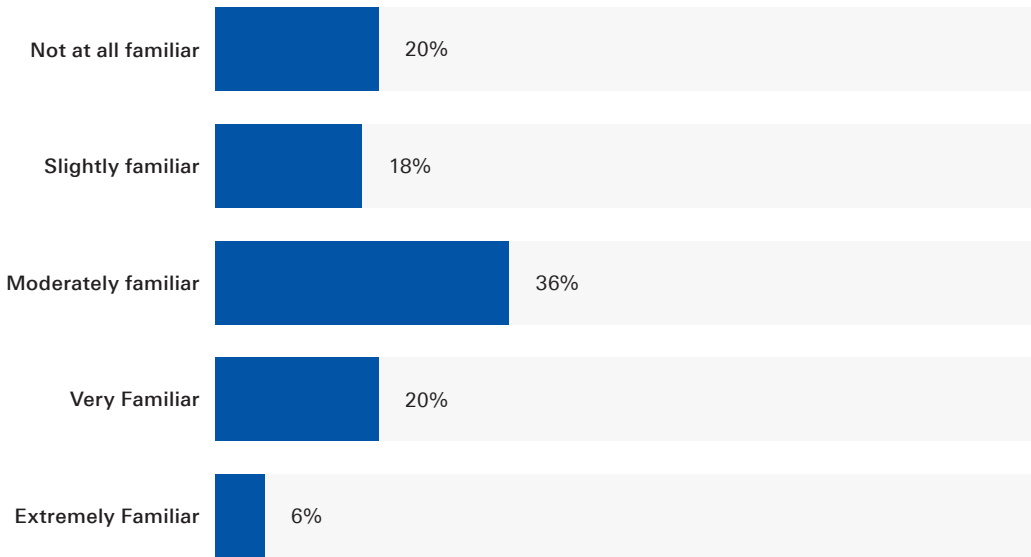


**APGA's Garden Budget Size Categories*

Understanding Social Sustainability

Recognizing that not all respondents may be familiar with the concept of social sustainability, we began by establishing a baseline understanding—asking participants to indicate their level of familiarity with the term.

How is the familiarity with Social Sustainability term?



Familiarity with the concept of **“social sustainability”** remains low among public garden respondents: 38% of respondents were not at all or slightly familiar while 26% were very or extremely familiar. Respondents noted that terms and definitions related to social sustainability have varied over time, with many gardens addressing various aspects under different terminology for years. Despite this, they emphasized the importance of clear communication to ensure proper recognition of public gardens’ efforts, strengthen their advocacy with government bodies, and garner the public support necessary to advance initiatives for a sustainable future.

Considering the importance of clear communication, we delve into the aspects of having the concepts of sustainability into public gardens strategic plan.

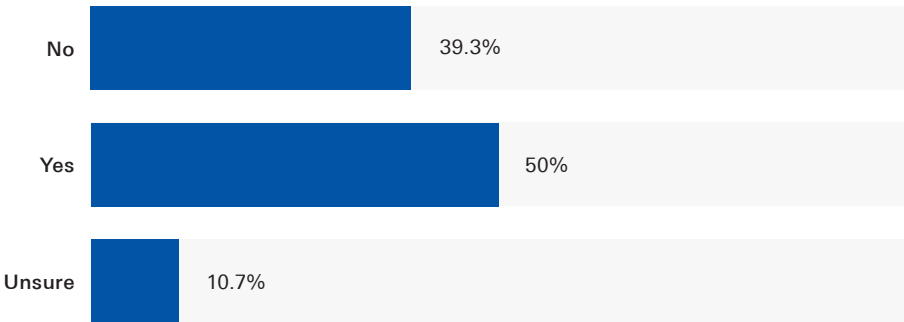
Which pillars of sustainability are part of your strategic plan?



Public Gardens’ strategic plans reflected adoption of an integrated approach to sustainability, frequently incorporating all three pillars: social (75.7%), economic (78.4%), and environmental (89.2%).

When considering specifically the social sustainability aspects as part of the strategic plan, half of the respondents (50%) indicated that “social sustainability” is addressed within their strategic plans, though 39.3% of public gardens reported not using the specific term, and 10.7% were uncertain.

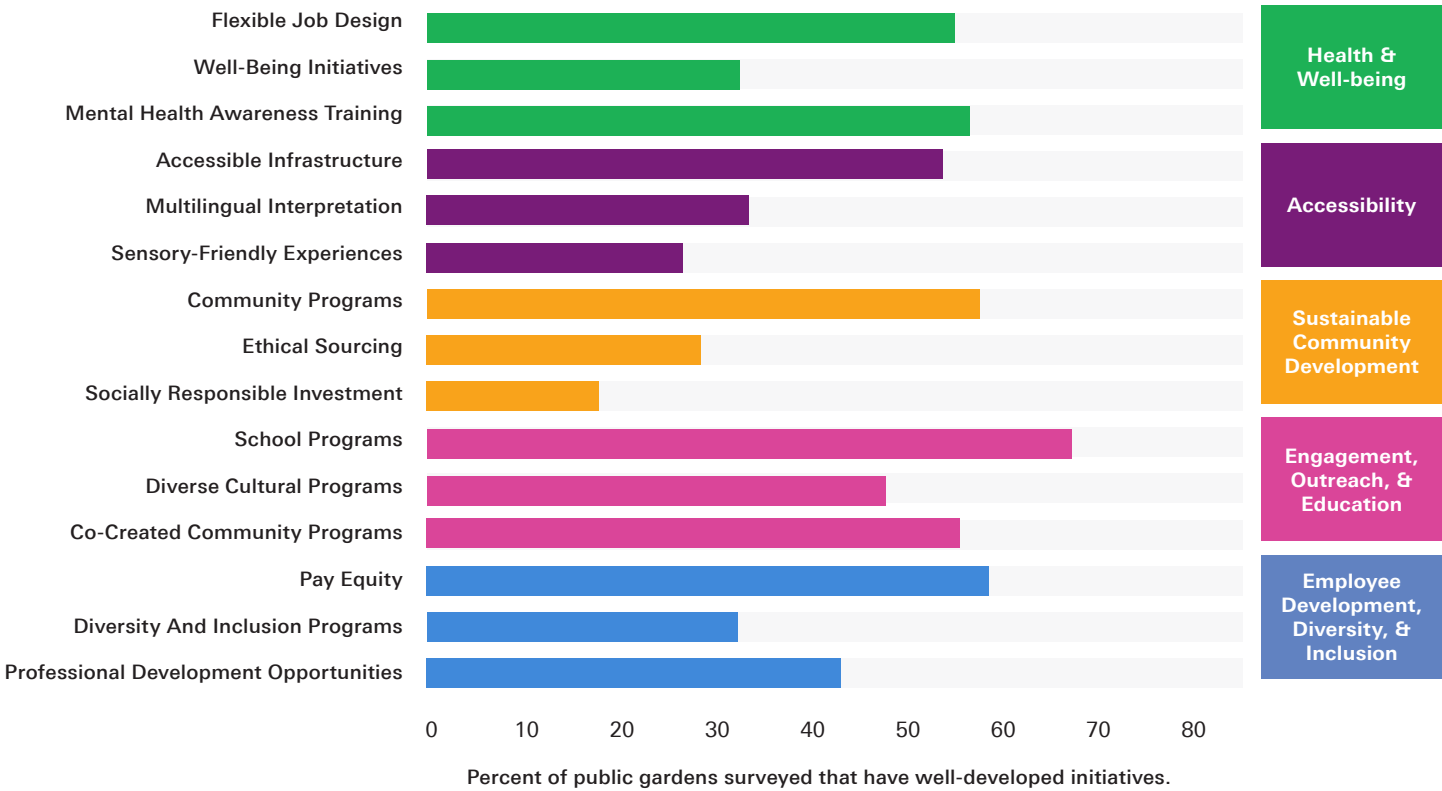
Is social sustainability specifically articulated as part of your plan?



Current Practices and Emerging Priorities

Anticipating varying levels of familiarity with the definition and components of social sustainability, the survey provided context based on APGA’s Public Gardens Sustainability Index, and subsequent questions delved into specific social sustainability practices, challenges, and future plans.

Well-developed social sustainability initiatives for public gardens:



Of the 15 social sustainability initiatives listed, **community engagement, outreach, and education initiatives were “well developed” for more than half of public gardens**. Considering that “fostering education and awareness of plants” and “engaging with communities” are the most frequently used words in garden mission statements, according to the 2023–2024 Longwood Fellows cohort project study, this finding is not surprising.¹³ Conversely, initiative areas not yet well developed by gardens according to our results (less or equal of 35% reporting “well developed”) included sensory friendly experiences and multilingual interpretation. Respondents anticipated these practices will be incorporated into their future strategic plans. The survey results are in accordance with the APGA, IDEA Needs Assessment published in 2022, where accessibility efforts were identified as either planned or underway.¹⁴ Other initiatives that fall into the less than 35% included socially responsible investments, ethical sourcing, employee well-being initiatives, and diversity and inclusion programs. These initiatives were reported to be future goals for public gardens. Shifts on the sustainability focus also reflects a growing understanding of these emerging priorities over the past decade as well as a more holistic and systematic approach to social sustainability as developed by the sustainable development goals of the United Nations.¹⁵

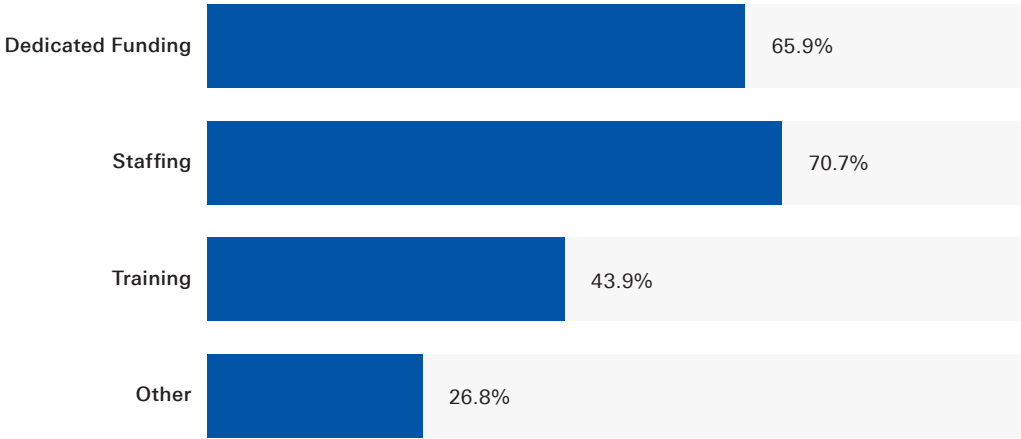
The Following Key Themes and Priorities for the Future Emerged from Our Study

Health & Well-being	<p>Flexible job design that accommodate employee needs has contributed to promoting greater employee diversity.</p> <p>The lack of dedicated funds, staff, and time has resulted in the absence of well-being initiatives for employees.</p>
Accessibility	<p>Accessibility is a primary focus in the strategic planning of several gardens.</p> <p>Multilingual initiatives are not currently a focus due to a lack of resources.</p>
Sustainable Community Development	<p>An "open-door policy" fosters sustainable community development and collaborations.</p> <p>Ethical sourcing and socially responsible investments are emerging as a recent focus for gardens.</p>
Engagement, Outreach, & Education	<p>Community programs are well-developed initiatives in public gardens.</p> <p>Community programs present an opportunity to create and expand collaborations and partnerships.</p>
Employee Development, Diversity, & Inclusion	<p>Professional development is encouraged to enhance management skills.</p> <p>Diversity and inclusion are constrained by political sensitivities, low turnover, and a lack of a diverse career pipeline.</p> <p>Pay equity and benefits are key focuses for acquiring and retaining talent.</p>

Challenges to Advancing Social Sustainability

While many public gardens are making meaningful strides in social sustainability, the journey is not without its obstacles. Insufficient staffing followed by dedicated funding were noted as the biggest challenges by a majority of the responding public gardens.

What are the challenges and barriers that your organization encounters in this work?



Additional challenges . . .

Further analysis of open-ended responses revealed additional obstacles, including political sensitivities, time constraints, and a limited pipeline of diverse talent. Many respondents noted that horticulture is often not perceived as a viable career path due to compensation issues, further hindering progress in addressing these challenges. Qualitative responses also identified key gaps in cultural inclusion to create a true sense of belonging for the communities they serve and the need for stronger advocacy within government agencies.

Future Directions and Goals

Looking ahead, public gardens are envisioning a more intentional and inclusive approach to social sustainability. As awareness grows, so does the commitment to embedding these values into future strategic plans through a range of meaningful initiatives.

Public gardens’ future social sustainability goals emphasized equity and engagement.

The following graphic was created based on responses to an open-ended question regarding plans for social sustainability, providing a visual representation of the most frequently mentioned terms and themes.



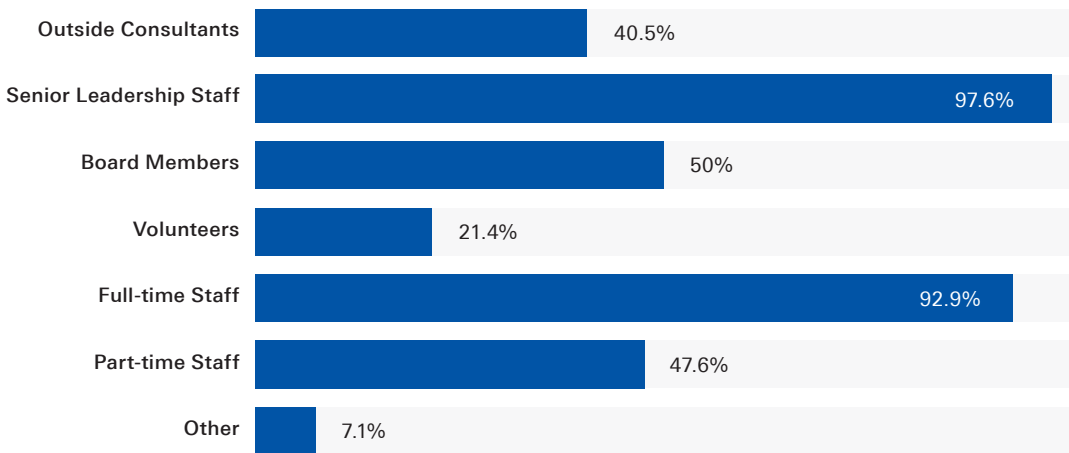
Respondents identified social sustainability as a key concept to be integrated into future strategic plans. Proposed initiatives included staff-focused measures such as pay equity, living wages, workforce development, and health and wellness promotion. Community engagement was also a priority, with programs targeting accessibility, cultural inclusivity, and environmental activities. Additionally, efforts to improve transparency, adopt ethical sourcing practices, and develop equitable programming are gaining attention.

Who’s Leading the Work?

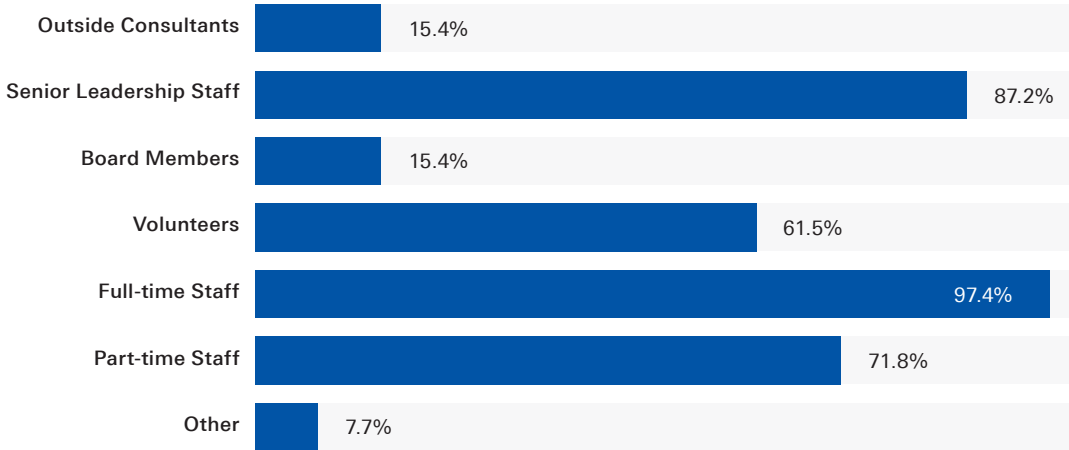
Senior leadership and full-time staff drive planning and implementation.

In developing these initiatives, our survey revealed a diverse group of contributors involved in planning and implementation. During the planning phase, senior leadership (97.6%) and fulltime staff (92.9%) are most frequently involved. In the implementation phase, full-time staff most often take the lead (97.4%), followed by senior leadership (87.2%). Additional contributors included part-time staff and volunteers. Qualitative comments from respondents highlighted the value of partnerships with community experts, while underscoring the need for gardens to appropriately compensate those who contribute knowledge and expertise.

Planning



Implementing



Data Summary and Key Findings

Public gardens are steadily advancing their social sustainability efforts, though persistent challenges—particularly around funding, staffing, and advocacy—continue to hinder progress. As awareness of social sustainability grows, gardens are increasingly focused on embedding their principles into future strategic plans to foster greater equity, inclusivity, and community engagement.

Key highlights from the survey include:

- **Familiarity with Social Sustainability:** While 26% of respondents reported being "very" to "extremely" familiar with the term, 20% were unfamiliar, and more than half identified as only "slightly" or "moderately" familiar.
- **Strengths:** Over 60% of gardens reported well-developed initiatives in community engagement, outreach, and education—areas strongly aligned with their core missions.
- **Opportunities for Growth:** Less-developed focus areas included multilingual interpretation, sensory-friendly experiences, employee health and well-being, diversity and inclusion, and ethical sourcing and investments.
- **Challenges:** Nearly 70% of gardens cited insufficient funding and staffing as the most significant barriers to advancing social sustainability work.
- **Internal Priorities:** Future efforts will focus on staff-centered initiatives such as well-being, professional development, compensation, and workforce development.
- **External Priorities:** Respondents also emphasized expanding community-centered initiatives, including accessibility, cultural inclusivity, and equitable programming.
- **Next Steps:** Many public gardens indicated a commitment to explicitly incorporating social sustainability into future strategic planning efforts.

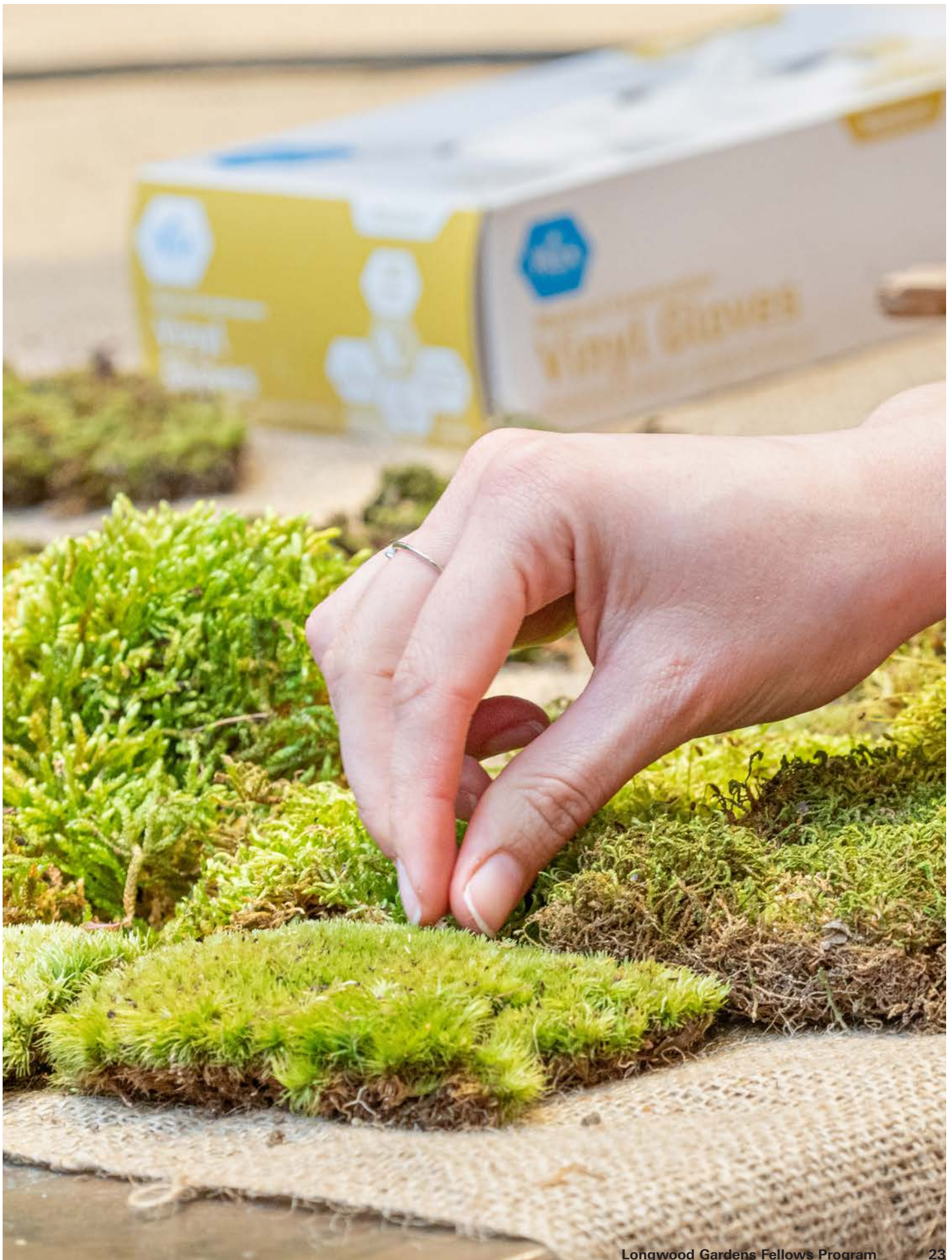
Social Sustainability Stories: Garden Case Studies

The 2024–2025 Longwood Fellows conducted case study interviews with leaders of public gardens in the United States to explore social sustainability principles and initiatives underway or being explored. The case studies feature gardens of varied sizes and levels of maturity, and new to firmly established initiatives, all of which provide insightful examples of gardens placing the well-being and engagement of people at the center of their work.

These interviews highlight achievements and share the challenges that are part of every change journey to offer inspiration and encouragement to others on the road to social sustainability outcomes.



Learn more by listening to interviews
via this QR code or by visiting
longwoodgardens.org/cohort-project/2025.



Adkins Arboretum

Location	Ridgely, Maryland
Size	400 acres
Staff	Approximately 8 employees
Focus	Accessibility

Located in Maryland, Adkins Arboretum emphasizes community and the joy of nature. Its mission is to inspire everyone to care for the environment, find peace and healing, and appreciate the beautiful mix of natural and cultural diversity around us.

Improving Accessibility and Inclusivity at Their Arboretum

The organization is working on several initiatives to improve accessibility and inclusivity at their Arboretum. One major project involves a state highway grant aimed at enhancing the accessibility of their trails, which traverse woodlands, meadows, and wetlands.

The Arboretum is focused not only on physical accessibility but also on making their programs more inclusive. It has dedicated professional development to train staff on accessible birding, for example.

Future Focus

This expansion is part of a broader strategy to create a more inclusive environment, with membership reflecting sustained community support.

Strong Emphasis on Cultural Sustainability

The Arboretum also places a strong emphasis on cultural sustainability, offering programs that highlight the region's history particularly through a self-guided tour called Rooted Wisdom: Nature's Role in the Underground Railroad. It's partnered with a video production nonprofit to produce videos and podcasts that bring local history to life. These are available on an app, increasing accessibility to the content.

It also recently decided to offer free admission, with the intention of encouraging people to become members to help support the organization.

Additionally, the Arboretum hosts a free monthly "healing walk," where participants gather to share their personal experiences, creating a sense of community and wellness. Its approach centers on maintaining its community-focused mission, which has been part of its identity since its 1995 master plan.



“We are place-based institutes, being public gardens, responding not just to natural heritage, but the cultural impact around the garden”

—Abby Lorenz, Director of Public Engagement, Former Longwood Gardens Fellow



The Brenton Arboretum

Location	Dallas Center, Iowa
Size	148 acres
Staff	7 employees
Focus	Community Engagement Programs

The Brenton Arboretum became a reality in the spring of 1997 when the first trees were planted on the 140-acre nonprofit site. The land is part of the original homestead acquired by Dr. James Brenton and his son, William Henry. Today, it includes an ever-expanding collection of more than 4,000 trees and shrubs representing 500 species, hybrids, and cultivars. The Arboretum's mission is to inspire joy through the beauty and knowledge of the natural world of trees. It is deeply committed to education, conservation, and community engagement. Accessibility and inclusivity are at the core of The Brenton Arboretum's operations. Programs are designed to ensure free public school field trips, youth programming, and classroom visits—making the Arboretum a welcoming space for all.

Building Community Through Relationships

Melissa Burdick, Executive Director, shares that building community partnerships began with active engagement in local networks, like the Rotary Club, where she began getting to know people and learning how the Arboretum could serve them. As she shared, “We’re limited—we’re limited by manpower, but what we don’t run short of is space. [...]. So, we will give as much as we can of ourselves.” This mindset fostered an open-door policy for mission-aligned organizations and led to a variety of outreach programs—local events, experiential programs such as Crafty Cocktails and yoga sessions, and partnerships with schools. When it comes to working with schools, Melissa acknowledges the challenges of connecting with the right people and building effective communication channels. She emphasizes the importance of listening first rather than assuming why people might not be attending programs: “You can’t presume to know what people need or want.”

Meeting people where they are—and responding to their real needs—has been key to fostering trust and participation. As a final takeaway, Melissa highlights the power of collaboration and open-mindedness in building community partnerships, for thoughtful consideration of new ideas and creative ways to combine efforts.



*“Can we together do
something bigger?”*

—Melissa Burdick, Executive Director, Former Longwood Gardens
Graduate Student



Chicago Botanic Garden

Location	Chicago, Illinois
Size	385 acres
Staff	Approximately 500 employees
Focus	Community Engagement Programs

The Chicago Botanic Garden (CBG) is a world-renowned living museum, a nonprofit organization run as a public/private partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The main focus of CBG is to inspire people connections with plants, whether through science, urban agriculture, lifelong learning opportunities, or the beauty of horticulture.

Community-Centered Urban Agriculture

As shared by President and CEO Jean Franczyk, “At CBG we exist to connect people to the power of plants, so that people and planet may thrive.” To build this connection, CBG is deeply invested in partnerships with its community in the greater Chicago area and beyond, offering several projects on the Windy City Harvest urban agriculture program. These programs include: Youth Farm, a paid youth development program for Chicago teens in urban agriculture from spring through fall; Apprenticeship, which offers a certificate in sustainable urban agriculture; Corps, a transitional employment opportunity to 30 - 40 justice-involved individuals and veterans per year in closely mentored, full-time, paid transitional jobs; and Veggie Rx, a prescription-based food-as-medicine program for patients with diet-related diseases.

The Power of Partnership and Flexibility

With this diverse set of programs, Jean emphasizes community partnerships are the foundation for 25 years of Windy City Harvest programming. Highlighting the commitment to evolving community needs, these farms on the South and West sides of Chicago have created long-lasting relationships. She emphasizes the importance of good and clear communication and understanding about what all partners are striving to achieve. “Clarity of purpose and goals is key—good communication is the foundation of success or failure, no matter what your enterprise.”

Another highlight of these partnerships is the importance of remaining flexible and open to changing circumstances. Jean shared that during the Covid pandemic, the Veggie Rx had to shift to curbside pickup and cooking classes via Facebook. The virtual cooking classes proved to be very popular. “Pleasant surprises come when you are forced to do things differently.” Within the same program, Jean also shared that the produce in the Veggie Rx boxes is culturally appropriate and information is available in both English and Spanish.

Telling the Story Through Real Lives

An important focus for Jean is to communicate how the program impacts people. “I’m going to tell our urban agriculture stories by talking about the impact on somebody’s life. If we can’t connect people to our ‘power of plants’ story, it’s not going to resonate.”



“Partnership is really important, and I think that good communication is the foundation of success or failure, no matter what your enterprise. Being really clear about what you need to be successful, what your partners need to be successful, and maintaining those open lines of communication is essential.”

—Jean M. Franczyk, President and CEO



Denver Botanic Garden

Location	Denver, Colorado
Size	24 acres
Staff	Approximately 350 employees
Focus	Social Sustainability as a holistic view in the organization

In support of the institution’s mission to connect people with plants, Denver Botanic Garden has embarked on many initiatives to support the local community using their deep connections with their partners.

Creating Community Connections Through Access and Engagement

The organization is committed to making programs accessible to all and it’s not just about offering events; it’s about ensuring that every person, regardless of background or circumstance, can engage meaningfully. Its focus is on removing barriers to access, offering something for everyone, and engaging diverse communities.

The Evolution of the Shuttle Program

The Go2Gardens Free Shuttle Program started as basic transportation but has grown into a more comprehensive service. Jennifer Riley-Chetwynd, Director of Marketing and Social Responsibility, explains that by offering bus services, transport credits, and free admission to events, tailored experiences, like sensory-friendly programs with horticultural therapists and bilingual guides, this program helps ensure that transportation and engagement are accessible to all. While public transportation is a key element for many, transportation often causes a barrier. The shuttle program fills the gap by providing reliable, direct access to the facility.

With over 200 community partners, Denver Botanic Garden strengthens relationships with organizations and partnerships who are essential for fostering trust and engagement, offering shuttle services and tailored programming to those in need.

Two Important Lessons Have Shaped the Team’s Approach:

- Trust and Advocacy: Having someone to advocate for community needs and build trust is essential.
- Adaptability: The importance of pivoting to meet changing needs within the community.

Social Sustainability: A Holistic Approach

Denver Botanic Garden’s approach is about more than just access, it’s about creating a sense of belonging by serving thousands of people through shuttle services and free access to programming. The goal is to foster a community where everyone, regardless of situation, feels welcome.

Looking to the Future

As the garden expands shuttle routes, offers more free tickets, and creates accessible programs, the focus is on long-term community engagement. By continuing to break down barriers and build trust, the garden is shaping a place that belongs to everyone.



“It comes down to making this garden a place for everyone.”

—Jennifer Riley-Chetwynd, Director of Marketing and Social Responsibility



Holden Forests and Gardens (HFG): Holden Arboretum and Cleveland Botanic Garden

Location	Cleveland, Ohio and suburban surroundings
Size	3,630 acres
Staff	170–250 employees (seasonal)
Focus	Pay Equity as a Component of the Employee Value Proposition

The City of Cleveland faces significant economic challenges, making equitable access and sustainable careers especially critical. HFG addresses these issues by reducing barriers to access, creating job opportunities, and supporting staff through socially sustainable initiatives, including a new compensation structure.

2014 Merger: Stabilizing for the Future

In 2014 the Cleveland Botanical Garden and The Holden Arboretum merged to create a single entity. Both organizations were facing financial challenges, and the combination represented a strategy to stabilize both financially. Over the next several years, leadership created a sustainable financial model. In doing so, compensation became an area of concern.

Recognizing the Need for Change

In 2023, HFG identified the need for a compensation study, which was reinforced by staff as a major concern in annual employee engagement surveys. The study resulted in a new compensation structure based on market competitiveness and internal equity. Implementing the study was challenging initially. In the several months between the study’s announcement and completion, employees developed differing expectations for outcomes. Gap analysis showed a significant investment was required, but financial constraints suggested implementing market adjustments and wage increases over

multiple years rather than all at once. A number of staff pushed back on this decision, citing concerns about individual financial needs, relevant data sources, and process transparency. To address this, HFG’s People & Culture team improved transparency by engaging an independent auditor, verifying data sources, clarifying communications, confirming market data, and updating job descriptions with staff feedback.

Building Trust Through Transparency

The board established a Compensation and Benefits Task Force and approved a 2025 budget centered on supporting staff, expediting fulfilment of the wage study in just one year. All employees were placed appropriately in the compensation structure based on experience, tenure, and span of responsibility with a focus on internal equity.

Giving Employees a Voice

Additionally, an Employee Advisory Committee was formed to give staff a greater voice. The Committee consists of 10 elected representatives and 5 appointed members, representing different viewpoints and priorities, including vocal contrarians. According to Ed Moydell, President & Chief Executive Officer, “The group doesn’t always agree, but they respect each other and work through disagreement to a positive outcome. Some who may have been skeptical at the beginning are now open and recognize positive movement. That is a significant silver lining because those people are major influencers.” Moydell sees this shift strengthening the organization’s internal culture and positioning it for future success as an Employer of Choice.



“It wasn’t just about wages; it was about creating a workplace together where people feel valued.”

—Ed Moydell, President & Chief Executive Officer, Former Longwood Gardens Graduate Student and Member of the Longwood Fellows Advisory Committee

Images courtesy of Holden Forests and Gardens.

Cultural Transformation and Organizational Alignment

Ed says, “I am a person who is driven by silver linings.” Now staff are pulling the oars in the same direction. This shift has freed them to engage more fully, think creatively, and focus on what benefits the organization as a whole.

Key Insights for Garden Leaders Implementing Pay Equity

- Transparency from the Start: Clearly outline the process, data sources, and staff involvement from the beginning. This prevents employees from forming unrealistic expectations.
- Consistent Communication: Regular updates are crucial, keeping staff informed and engaged.
- “Amnesia Reduction Strategies”: Repeat key priorities in staff meetings. At every all-staff meeting, highlight focus areas, show what progress has been made, and explain what’s coming next. This repetition helps ensure that employees remain aware of ongoing efforts.
- Employee Involvement in Job Descriptions: Employees and their supervisors should agree upon the critical components of their job descriptions. If done well, they understand which job family they belong to, why they are classified that way, and how their wages are determined.
- Thoughtful Conversations and Training: When discussing job classifications and wages with employees, it’s vital to have well-trained leaders who can communicate clearly and consistently, ensuring a respectful and transparent process.



Images courtesy of Holden Forests and Gardens.

Longwood Gardens

Location	Kennett Square, Pennsylvania
Size	More than 1,100 acres
Staff	685–735 employees (seasonal)
Focus	Employee Engagement

Longwood Gardens: A Culture of People-First Leadership and Social Sustainability

One of Longwood Gardens most notable commitments is prioritizing people in their 2030 strategic plan. This initiative includes investing in leadership development, adapting benefits to meet the evolving needs of a multigenerational workforce, and building a workforce that reflects the diversity of the broader community. Longwood recognizes that sustaining a healthy and inclusive workforce is fundamental to delivering exceptional guest experiences.

Shelley Dinehart, Chief Human Resources and Culture Officer, credits Longwood’s CEO, Paul Redman, for establishing a people-first framework and restructuring the organization to emphasize culture as a strategic priority. This commitment echoes Longwood’s historical values dating back to the Great Depression, when Pierre S. du Pont prioritized his employees during a time of economic hardship.

Shelley emphasizes that an engaged workforce begins with offering tools for personal and professional development, fostering an inclusive culture where individuals feel valued. She explains, “You can only deliver the guest experience you’re aiming for when you have a fully engaged workforce,” which is why Longwood prioritizes employee well-being as part of its broader mission.

Several concrete strategies have been implemented, including wellness programs, cultural wellness days, financial planning services, and mental health initiatives. These efforts are not

static; their effectiveness is constantly evaluated through utilization data, retention rates, and employee engagement. When programs like financial planning see low uptake, Longwood examines communication channels and barriers to participation to ensure programs are relevant and accessible.

A defining feature of this strategy is its adaptability. Shelley explains that success in workforce culture is “a marathon, not a sprint.” Over the past two years, positive trends such as increased staff retention and more diverse applicant pools have emerged, affirming that Longwood is on the right path. Key performance indicators include internal promotions, use of support programs, and improved communication practices, all aimed at reinforcing a connected, resilient workforce.

Shelley highlights that initiatives must be both mission-driven and realistic given resource limitations. Staff capacity, budgets, and skill sets must all be factored in. The key is understanding where the organization currently stands through data and feedback, and then using that knowledge to prioritize actionable steps.

Ultimately, Shelley’s insights illustrate how Longwood Gardens integrates social sustainability and human-centered leadership into its operational strategy, creating a workplace that values growth, inclusivity, and long-term well-being. The impact is clear: higher engagement, stronger retention, and a culture that continues to evolve in alignment with its mission.



“You can only deliver the guest experience you’re aiming for when you have a fully engaged workforce.”

—Shelley Dinehart, Chief Human Resources and Culture Officer



Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS)

Location	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Staff	126 employees
Focus	Horticulture as a tool to advance health and well-being

Founded in 1827, PHS is based in Philadelphia and serves 230 neighborhoods in Philadelphia and its surrounding counties.

Social sustainability is at the heart of everything PHS does. In 2018, PHS underwent a visioning and strategic planning process to answer the question: “How can we maximize the potential of horticulture to benefit the greater Philadelphia region over the next 10 years?” Over the course of 18 months, PHS reached out to community stakeholders and shaped the vision that PHS would use horticulture to advance health and well-being of the Greater Philadelphia region.

To further this vision, everything PHS does is rooted in using horticulture to advance four social determinants of health, as detailed on their website (phsonline.org/our-story):

- Creating healthy living environments
- Increasing access to fresh food
- Expanding economic opportunity
- Building meaningful social connections

This framework has helped the organization to measure impact and further build the case for the connection between horticulture and health. It is advancing these impact priorities through community gardening programs, tree planting programs, workforce development programs, cleaning and greening vacant lots, and utilizing the annual flower show as a platform to build professional visibility for underrepresented voices in horticulture. It has shifted from being an activity-driven organization to a cause-driven organization with health and well-being at the center.

Matt Rader, President, notes that people may think that the contributions of gardens to sustainability is limited to the conservation and care of plants, but there is so much potential for gardens to address social, economic, and health challenges. To address this knowledge gap, PHS is continually acting as a leader and vocal advocate for horticulture as a tool to build healthier cities and communities.



“The potential for public gardens as institutions to positively impact society is huge, and it can be as simple as the number of people who volunteer or feel involved in the garden, who now have meaning and community that they wouldn’t have otherwise had—changes the world, right?”

—Matt Rader, President, Pennsylvania Horticulture Society



Conclusion

Today, in our current climate and increasingly interconnected and globalized world, these three pillars of sustainability—social, environmental, and economic—are more relevant than ever. Nations, cultures, and communities must collaborate to ensure the sustainability of our planet’s resources, the resilience of our societies, and the health of our economies.

The Fellows are optimistic about the progress public gardens are making in the sphere of social sustainability. Leaders across the industry are engaging with this concept in exciting and innovative ways. There is clear forward momentum to further center the human dimension of our gardens—the staff, volunteers, and community members who make our gardens possible. We hope this guide will inspire public garden leaders to continue this work, further deepening their commitment to social sustainability principles and practices. Together, we will continue to support our communities' well-being and quality of life for present and future generations.



About the Fellows Program



The Longwood Fellows Program is a unique leadership development program, preparing high-potential professionals for high-impact public horticulture careers. The 2024–2025 Longwood Fellows are widely accomplished, with diverse areas of expertise and extensive experience in public garden leadership. This project reflects their global perspective and common goal to contribute to public gardens in the field of social sustainability.

The Longwood Fellows Program is a one-of-a-kind leadership development program designed to prepare high-potential professionals for high-impact roles in public horticulture. Continuing Longwood Gardens' mission-driven history of targeted training and education for horticulture professionals, the Fellows Program supports the development of a robust, diverse, and qualified talent pool for the sector at large. Fellows have unique opportunities to refine their leadership skills by heightening self-awareness, interacting with experts and thought leaders, and absorbing customized content on organizational behavior, nonprofit management, strategic planning, and team development. The program grafts theory with practice, offering Fellows the opportunity to conduct case-based discussions, learn from regional and global public horticulture leaders, and engage in pragmatic learning via departmental immersions, a two-month field placement with a partner organization, and a research-based cohort project focused on addressing pressing issues in public horticulture.

More information about the Longwood Fellows Program can be found at longwoodgardens.org/fellows. Applications are accepted each June 1–July 31 for the cohort starting the following summer. Organizations are invited to nominate outstanding staff members to participate in this prestigious leadership development opportunity.

Pictured above from left to right: Clare Shearman, Laurel Dunning, Anastasia Sallen, E. Yvette Weaver, and Vânia Pereira. Photo by Carlos Alejandro.

2024–2025 Longwood Fellows

Laurel Dunning

Laurel Dunning has led horticulture teams and managed several historic landmark gardens in California. An alumna of Longwood Gardens' esteemed internship program and a Longwood Fellow, Laurel has deepened her expertise in arboriculture, strategic planning, and team leadership. She is passionate about land stewardship and the integration of natural resource conservation within public garden landscapes.

"Social sustainability in public horticulture means cultivating connections and creating inclusive spaces where people can explore, grow, and thrive together. Just as we care for, protect, and advocate for our botanical collections, it is vital that we extend the same level of care and advocacy to the horticulturists who steward them."

Vânia Pereira

Vânia Pereira, originally from Brazil, earned her Ph.D. in Environmental Horticulture from the University of Florida, where she researched and developed a sustainable production protocol for the conservation of a native palm. She is a passionate conservation horticulturist committed to advancing plant conservation and fostering inclusive and educational public garden spaces.

"Public gardens play a key role in connecting people with nature by providing welcoming spaces filled with beauty, opportunities for learning, plant conservation efforts, and places to relax—supporting the well-being of both visitors and staff."

Anastasia Sallen

Anastasia Sallen most recently served as Associate Vice President for Education at Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida. With a background in horticulture and education, she enjoys building dynamic programs that spark curiosity about the environment.

"As places where plants and people come together, public gardens are uniquely situated to support the well-being of staff and their local communities, leading us towards a more sustainable future. Together, our seemingly small actions for social sustainability echo out into larger collective change."

Clare Shearman

Clare Shearman serves as the Plant Collection Team Manager at Wellington Botanic Garden in New Zealand, maintaining the garden's historical significance while adapting to modern times, allowing her to combine her passions for history, garden design, and plant cultivation.

"In today's world, gardens have become increasingly vital, serving as spaces that promote well-being, relaxation, conservation, and education—far more than just aesthetically pleasing open areas."

E. Yvette Weaver

Yvette Weaver's horticultural journey has been defined by her dedication to enriching New York City's public gardens. Most recently she served as Horticulture Supervisor at Friends of The High Line. Her passion for public gardens has grown to include a dedication to the people who work in the field of horticulture, and a desire to create and build opportunities for careers and growth in horticulture.

"Public gardens are essential not only for connecting visitors to vibrant and dynamic green spaces, but also for fostering thriving and dignified work cultures that enhance employee engagement and professional growth."

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