

Lehigh Valley Greenways Conservation Landscape SUCCESS STORY

By: Lehigh Gap Nature Center
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Lehigh Gap Nature Center Native Sensory Garden Trail (Awarded 2020)

SUMMARY

Lehigh Gap Nature Center's (LGNC) interactive Native Sensory Garden Trail welcomes visitors and LINK trail-users to experience native plants in a completely new way. Planted alongside ADA-compliant trails, a variety of sensory-friendly native plants are accompanied with informational signage, outdoor musical instruments, "please touch" sensory panels, and a brochure. In addition to fostering an appreciation of native plants among a broader audience, the Native Sensory Garden Trail provides novel opportunities for self-guided learning and exploration that is accessible to children and adults with special needs. The Trail also serves as an inviting entryway to LGNC's native habitat gardens.



CHALLENGE

Although LGNC's habitat gardens feature over 200 plant species native to the region, prior to the construction of the Native Sensory Garden Trail, visiting the gardens was primarily a passive experience. Signs and brochures identified the plants, but few of the available resources facilitated hands-on learning. Much of the existing garden trail was ADA-compliant, but the gardens lacked sensory-stimulating features accessible to individuals with special needs, especially those on the Autism Spectrum. This need for more interactive self-guided learning opportunities became further apparent during the pandemic, when in-person outreach was not possible and trail use increased.

In addition to meeting the above needs, this project was intended to spark an interest in conservation. In the face of challenges like climate change, pollinator decline, and habitat loss, access to inclusive and engaging environmental education is of paramount importance. Given the vital roles native plants play in addressing such daunting challenges as those listed above, there is a growing need to foster awareness of native landscapes and their myriad ecological benefits.

FUNDING

Grant Award:
\$4,000.00

Match:
\$8,464.81

Total Project Cost:
\$12,464.81

PARTNERSHIP IS KEY

- Alliance for Watershed Education of the Delaware River (financial partner)
- Edge of the Woods Native Plant Nursery (conservation partner)
- Martin Guitar Charitable Foundation (financial partner)
- The Harry C. Trexler Trust (financial partner)
- William Penn Foundation (financial partner)



SOLUTION

LGNC envisioned a one-of-a-kind Native Sensory Garden Trail as a means of improving public access to experiential outdoor education within its existing habitat gardens. To address the lack of hands-on learning opportunities and sensory-stimulating features in the gardens, the project incorporated sensory-friendly plants, interactive signs, nature play elements, and a brochure. The Sensory Garden Trail as a whole was also designed to be fully wheelchair accessible and to serve as a therapeutic resource for children and adults on the Autism Spectrum. To meet the need for cultivating awareness of native plants, this project offers opportunities for visitors to experience a host of interesting native species in a very tangible and personal way. It is hoped that Sensory Garden Trail visitors will gain a deeper appreciation of native plants and feel motivated to create their own native backyard ecosystems.

RESULTS

With support from Lehigh Valley Greenways Conservation Landscape, LGNC created a hands-on Native Sensory Garden Trail around its Osprey House visitor center. Phase one of this project consisted of constructing a 15-by-24-foot entryway garden and 25-foot ADA-compliant connector trail. New native sensory-friendly species were planted in consultation with Edge of the Woods Native Plant Nursery. Phase two of the project involved installing additional plants, sensory elements, and permanent signage, as well as developing a brochure.

Throughout the habitat gardens, LGNC visitors will now discover over three dozen new plants that pique the senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch. Informational signs direct visitors to interact with each plant, while the complementary brochure – complete with a species checklist and map – guides their adventure. Along the way, visitors will also encounter two musical instruments and five “please touch” sensory panels featuring bones, rocks, and other natural items. Since the first phase of the garden was completed in the summer of 2020, numerous visitors of all ages have been observed interacting with the plants and, more recently, playing the instruments and touching the sensory panels. One student even expressed an interest in establishing his own sensory garden at home.

Contact



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