Reimagining the Museum Garden with Native Plants

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Topics

• Goals and Challenges for Museum Gardens
• Native Plants and Ecology
• Museums Shifting to Native Plants
• Laurel Museum
  • Assessment and Vision
  • Land Stewardship
  • Planning/Design
  • Acquisition & Planting
  • Maintenance
• Q&A
Goals for Museum Gardens

1. Make the space work for people
   • Pathways are clearly visible and walkable
   • Space for events

2. Make the museum look attractive
   • Well-kempt garden signals the museum is being maintained well
   • Good for photos, social media, and seasonal interest

3. Steward the land ethically
   • Minimize pesticides and runoff
   • Fend off invasive plants

4. Support the museum’s mission
   • ...?
Challenges for Museum Gardens

• Museum staff are busy running a museum!
• Gardening decisions often fall to landscapers
• Maintenance
• Invasive plant encroachment
Where Do Native Plants Come In?

Native gardens offer maintenance advantages.

Many museums are about “place,” and native gardens showcase plants that are “from here.”

Native plants are part of good land stewardship practices.
What Do We Mean by Native Plants?

Plants that “naturally occur” here.

The Laurel Museum is on the border of the Maryland Piedmont and Coastal Plain ecoregions.

(X marks the spot)
What Do Native Plants Do?
Does this Work with Non-Native Plants?

Watch Doug Tallamy’s recent talk “Nature’s Best Hope” at Google
Museums Shifting to Native Plants
Back to the Laurel Museum!
How We Got Started

The museum reached out to Laurel for the Patuxent (L4P) in the early fall of 2022.

We arranged a site visit and took a look at what was already on the property.

We talked through the museum’s vision for the space.
Pre-Existing

A lot of bare mulch and some native plants

• A row of winterberry
• A redbud tree
Pre-Existing

Some invasive plants
- A Callery “Bradford” pear tree
- English ivy
- Lesser celandine
- Garlic mustard
Creating a Vision

The museum wanted something low maintenance, attractive, and wanted to be part of the native plant movement going on.

We talked about ways we might engage the community.

Otherwise “go wild!”
Who is the Land Steward?

A land steward is someone who takes responsibility for the soil, water, plants, and animals that exist on a piece of land.

Early in the project, it’s important to ask: “Who is the land steward?”

It’s not necessarily:
• The designer
• The implementation team
• The executive of the property-owning organization
• “The Community”
Who is the Land Steward?

The land steward is:

• Going to be there after the installation is done.
• Has a clear relationship with the owner of the property.
• When everyone has forgotten the land exists, and attention is needed, they’re the one who makes sure it happens.

Without a land steward in place, it’s best to pause the project until you know who it is.
Wait, Why Do We Need a Land Steward?

They have authority, either direct or delegated, to
• approve most decisions.
• choose stewardship policies.
• make durable plans for the future.

A project can collapse unexpectedly without a steward supporting it.

Or, all that hard work can wither away, or even be undone!
Stewardship at the Laurel Museum

Ann – Laurel Historical Society Director

Delegates

Laurel for the Patuxent (L4P) as the Steward

Jimmy is the L4P point person for maintenance and proactive projects.
• Conducts site visits
• Organizes weeding days
• Replaces or divides plants as needed

Anything beyond maintenance is run back up to Ann and her staff for consideration, including any needed budget. Also, anything that requires discussion with other stakeholders, such as the city.
Breaking Down the Beds

- Sign
- Full Sun
- Winterberry
- Shade
Planting in Layers

The museum sign, winterberry, and shade trees are the structural layer.

I designed a ground cover layer for each bed first.

Then I added seasonal interest plants to grow up through the groundcover.
Sign Bed

Design Requirements:
• Plants must be no taller than two feet, to prevent blocking the sign

Ground Cover:
• Golden Alexanders (*Zizia aurea*)
• Moss phlox (*Phlox subulate*)

Seasonal Interest:
• Scarlet Beebalm (*Monarda dydima*, cultivar)
• Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*)
Full Sun Bed

Design Requirements:
• Take advantage of the sun and available height

Ground Cover:
• Golden Ragwort (*Packera aurea*)
• Plantain Pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*)

Seasonal Interest:
• Beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*)
• Spotted Beebalm (*Monarda punctata*)
• Orange Coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida*)
• Wrinkleleaf Goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*)
Winterberry Bed

Design Requirements:
• Form a low mat of plants under the winterberry, with some pops of interest

Ground Cover:
• Green and Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*)

Seasonal Interest:
• Ferns
• Coral Bells (*Heuchera americana*)
• Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)
• Bleeding Heart (*Dicentra exemia*)
Shade Bed

Design Requirements:
• Lots of space to cover, opportunity for a path

Ground Cover:
• Golden Ragwort (Packera aurea)

Seasonal Interest:
• Coral Bells (*Heuchera americana*)
• Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*)
• Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)
• Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*)
• Bleeding Heart (*Dicentra exemia*)
• Lady Fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*)
• White Wood Aster (*Eurybia divaricate*)
Buying the Plants

• I set a budget of $450
  • Assumed ~50 quart-sized plants at $7-$9 each, plus a little money for a few small shrubs if I could find plugs

• Almost all of the plants were straight species, rather than cultivars.

• I drove all around the area, buying from small plant sellers

• Many plants came from nearby native gardeners.
Installation Day

• We advertised the event, which informed the community what we were doing and got a few volunteers.

• The museum staff subsequently watered during the following few weeks in the mornings.

• Beyond that, little maintenance.
Slow-Growing Puzzle

- Plants were growing slower than expected
- The beds were densely packed with reclaimed wood mulch
- Now we’ve clarified the land stewardship practices going forward and who is responsible for what.
- Each year, the plants will grow fuller and they will restore the soil a little more.
We needed an early spring weeding, so we invited more community members to help.

Folks were curious what we planted.

With a little orientation and help, we pulled the weeds and not our new plantings!
Leaving the Leaves

• Stewardship is year-round, especially with wildlife in mind.
• We raked the leaves into the beds.
• Fewer weeds and lots of square feet of winter habitat created for insects.
Future Plans

• Children’s Day, Dig in! To Native Plants
  • April 28\textsuperscript{th} from 1-3p
  • Starting at the pool meeting room across from the museum
• Splitting plants in May, date TBD
  • Spreading out ground cover
  • Planting a line of \textit{Packera} against encroaching lesser celandine
  • Weeding and vine cutting
• Planting the summer plants more densely
• More interpretation and signage in the garden
• Laurel Garden Tour
  • June 22\textsuperscript{nd} from 10a-2p
Thinking of Your Own Project?

1. Meet to discuss a vision
2. Meet all of the stakeholders and agree on a land steward
3. Break up the project into areas, and possibly phases
4. Design the garden, groundcover first
5. Develop a budget and acquisition plan
6. Plan watering, maintenance, and stewardship activities
7. Install the garden
Resources

• US Fish and Wildlife Guide
  • https://www.nativeplantcenter.net
  • PDF

• Maryland Native Plant Society
  • https://www.mdflora.org

• Laurel for the Patuxent

• Free Native Garden Consults for Laurel Locals
  • nativegardenguy@gmail.com