

Zilker Botanical Garden: A Jewel in the Heart of Austin

A Dream Realized

In the early spring of 1924, Clara Driscoll held the first meeting of the Violet Crown Garden Club, in her home at Laguna Gloria. Violet Crown's mission was to promote an interest in gardening, education, and civic beautification. The group flourished in Austin. By the mid-1940s, the Violet Crown was seeking a place to meet and hold their flower shows. Later joined by a handful of other garden clubs, members presented their vision for a garden center, to Austin Recreation Department Director, Beverly Sheffield. Impressed with the idea, he suggested that the clubs form a group of the existing area garden clubs. Six garden clubs came together to form the Austin Area Garden Center, Inc., or AAGC, to promote education in the art of gardening. In 1960, reporter Betty McNabb wrote in the Austin American Statesman:

"Among the mountain laurel, mesquite and sumac which cover a pretty knoll on the southern slopes of Barton Springs Road, a building will one day rise to command a sweeping vista of the Colorado and the Capitol across the river. Around it will be gardens – formal gardens with stately walkways, informal gardens with unexpected nooks and crannies. Winding among the oaks, the elms and pecans and cedar trees that grow in profusion, the gardens will be a miniature of the beauty of Texas."

The City of Austin allocated land in Zilker Park, and in late September on a Sunday afternoon in 1963, the path to fulfill that dream began to come true. Mayor Lester Palmer and Mrs. Alden Davis, AAGC's first president, turned the first shovel of earth at the site of the Austin Area Garden Center and what would become Zilker Botanical Garden. In just one short year, the building was completed and dedicated. The work was a joint effort between the city and many volunteers. In the years following, the gardens began to take shape.

When he was seventy years old, Isamu Taniguchi, a member of the Men's Garden Club, built what is now the Taniguchi Japanese Garden as a gift to the people of Austin. Mr. Taniguchi spent 18 months transforming 3 acres of rugged, caliche hillside into a peaceful garden with a meandering stream and a series of ponds, which spell out the name

“Austin.” It opened to the public in 1969 as the first of Zilker Botanical Garden’s major attractions and remains today as one of the treasures of the Garden.

Roses began to lushly bloom on the Zilker hillside in 1973 when the Mabel Davis Rose Garden was dedicated. Today the roses still bloom for all of Austin to enjoy.

Opening in 2002, the Hartman Prehistoric Garden got its start when amateur paleontologists discovered hundreds of tracks of ancient reptiles in the area where this garden is located, confirming that dinosaurs once roamed in Austin. This garden is a unique, two-acre site developed as a Cretaceous habitat, with a world-class collection, representing species of plants that existed at the time of the dinosaurs.

It would be a lengthy document to chronicle the history of each of the gardens and features within Zilker Botanical Garden – every one represents countless hours of work by dedicated volunteers and park staff. Each a labor of love to help realize the dream of a garden jewel in the heart of Austin.

The Garden Today

Within Zilker Botanical Garden today, there are 20 gardens and specialty beds along with a number of historic structures and relics of Austin’s past. An urban oasis in the heart of Austin, the Garden draws around 110,000 visitors annually. The visitors who enjoy touring the grounds include every age you can imagine – from brand new babies toted around in carriers to centenarians. They come from all parts of Austin and around the world. And each year, hundreds of Austin school children make time to tour the gardens on field trips and for special school projects.

Currently, park staff work alongside countless volunteers who contribute their time and talents to share the responsibilities of caring for the Garden. The City of Austin has maintained ownership of the land and furnishes utilities, grounds maintenance, and building repairs. There are five gardeners, an irrigator, an event coordinator, a part time educator, and multiple temporary evening attendants and cashiers, led by an off-site manager. The mission of the Zilker Botanical Garden has been *“to provide horticultural displays and programs that enhance the beauty of public spaces and increase knowledge about plants.”* The Austin Area Garden Center is composed of 31 member clubs whose 1,500 members share the mission of *“promoting the education of citizens and youth in the art of gardening.”* The organization contributes funds and volunteers to support horticulture, education, and

publicity, and manages the gift shop. Member garden clubs hold several plant shows and sales throughout the year and give numerous educational programs each month on a wide range of horticultural topics, such as pest management, rainwater harvesting, identifying the appropriate plants for Central Texas, and water-wise gardening. Most of these education programs are free and open to the public. Seven clubs have Adopt-A-Garden agreements, with one more in the works, to work collaboratively on theme gardens.

We know the garden staff to be hardworking, dedicated and proud to be garden stewards. It's easy to see that, to them, Zilker Botanical Garden is much more than a place to work. Every day, they do their very best to keep our expansive gardens beautiful, and they do so with a limited budget and ever increasing needs. Unfortunately, the reality is that budgets are shrinking, requiring everyone to do more with less and less. There is no question that the Garden is beautiful place – the result of the hard work and dedication of so many people. But today, there isn't enough money to fully staff it. There is no longer a full time on-site manager and the number of full time employees has been reduced to one-third of what it was seven years ago. The current budget is not sufficient to maintain the existing gardens. It doesn't include funds for future improvements or expansions to help the Garden reach its full potential. Austin is not the only city facing these challenges. This is a common problem across the country and around the world.

A Dream for the Future

As Austin's urban core grows denser, it's more important than ever for citizens to have a place to appreciate nature's wonders. – a green space, where they can learn, volunteer, and even get their hands dirty. We need to continue investing in the dream of Austin's garden jewel.

Already in the works but awaiting funding are planned improvements to the garden. An area surrounding a leaking streambed, connecting the Japanese Garden's Lotus Pond with the Rose Pond, is waiting to be transformed into a beautiful new garden space. The Bonsai Society is seeking to make the Garden the home for the Texas State Bonsai Exhibit. An undeveloped corner of the Garden, will showcase incredible bonsai that have been meticulously grown and groomed for decades.

PARD and AAGC conducted a visioning exercise which highlighted the Garden's needs and untapped potential. The list for future possibilities is long one – the expansion of the

current facilities and plant collections, adding new gardens, conservatories and display greenhouses, more outdoor lighting, and improving ADA access are just some of the plans to consider.

Recognizing that managing a botanical garden does not fall under its mission, AAGC recently conducted a public survey and hired Seeds for Change Consulting to complete a study of funding and management options for the Garden. The results of the survey and study make clear that the Garden has the potential to become a world-class botanical garden. However, the future of the Garden is threatened by the lack of sufficient and secure funding.

It was concluded that the establishment of a co-manager, nonprofit conservancy to undertake the operation and management of Zilker Botanical Garden is the best option for both the Garden and the public. A conservancy would have the organizational and structural capacity for maintenance, operations, programming, and fundraising, including the establishment of an endowment, to ensure the sustainability of the garden. This model is already being successfully used in Austin and other cities. This January, volunteers formed the Zilker Botanical Garden Conservancy to work with the City of Austin and grow the Garden for the future. Its mission is *“to inspire people of all ages to treasure, promote, and protect the botanical wonders of our world.”* Its vision is *“to create a world-class botanical garden in the heart of Austin. We will guide, enhance and fund our urban oasis. Our key objectives are to provide education, conservation and research.”*

The Zilker Botanical Garden Conservancy is incorporated in the State of Texas and has filed for federal 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. Organizational structures to assume operation of the Garden are being developed. Numerous documents have been created, including bylaws, an advisory board charter, a policy and procedures manual, and a business and development plan. We are meeting regularly with PARD discussing operations, infrastructure, and ideas for a transition.