



# Nurturing Young Minds *with* Nature

The Carolina Children's Garden provides an imaginative space focused on nature where kids can learn through play.

BY VIVEKA NEVELN

**F**IRE ANTS nip at my sandaled feet while the unrelenting July sun beats down on our small group at the Clemson University Sandhill Research and Education Center in Columbia, South Carolina. Our guide, Arlene Marturano, welcomes us with straw fans and water bottles. As she begins to tell us the story of the Carolina Children's Garden, which we're here to see, I momentarily forget the heat and insects as I absorb her words. Take one shoestring budget, add in a few dedicated visionaries, a small army of volunteers, and "a whole lot of stick-to-it-tiveness," says Marturano, and what you get is one magical place for kids to learn about plants while building an affinity for the natural world.

Marturano tells us that this two-acre garden grew out of her experience attending the first National Children & Youth Garden Symposium hosted by the Amer-

ican Horticultural Society (AHS) in 1993. During that event, she visited the brand new children's garden at the AHS's River Farm headquarters in Virginia. Spaces at public gardens designed specifically for children have become much more common since then, but at the time the AHS's garden was at the leading edge of this trend.

This garden's playful approach to presenting environmental concepts and plants to young visitors stuck with Marturano, who was then teaching science at a middle school in Columbia. "Imagination had been largely removed from education but here it was at River Farm," she remembers. She also appreciated that

**The Carolina Children's Garden comprises several themed areas such as the alphabet garden in the foreground and the Mesozoic Memories garden beyond it.**

the ideas she saw "seemed do-able at home or a school, like a butterfly garden or an alphabet garden." On a personal level, she says, "it reminded me of my childhood garden and made me want to share that positive experience with more children."

Though she had already established an extensive garden program at her school, Marturano began to envision a garden for a broader audience than her students. She set her sights on Clemson's Sandhill facility because of its natural beauty and emphasis on horticultural demonstration for the public's benefit. She convinced its director at the time that a children's garden on site would be a win-win, based on the River Farm example. With the site secured, she then reached out to local businesses, organizations, and government agencies—"basically anyone who would listen to me," she says with a laugh. Half a



Brightly painted structures such as the arbor framing the entrance to the Bird Garden, left, and whimsical figures such as a topiary bear pushing a wheelbarrow, right, convey each area's theme.

dozen eagerly responded, so with the help of these community allies, the Carolina Children's Garden opened in 1997.

## IGNITING IMAGINATIONS WITH THEMES

Fast forward a couple of decades and Marturano is now giving us a tour as part of the 24th annual National Children & Youth Garden Symposium. We're also accompanied by Todd Beasley, who heads the Friends of the Carolina Children's Garden organization that oversees the garden. They are both particularly enthusiastic to

show us around because the garden has just undergone what Marturano characterizes as a makeover. Everything from the vigorous young plants to the jaunty bandanas on a family of topiary-frame bears bespeaks the recent rejuvenation.

The Carolina Children's Garden's basic layout remains unchanged, however. It still comprises several themed areas, reminiscent of the River Farm children's garden that inspired it. The first to catch my eye is the alphabet garden's large, brightly colored letters attached to a low, white picket

fence. I make a beeline for it after Marturano invites our group to explore on our own. Alongside each letter, I notice a plant with a name that begins with it—cheery orange cosmos for C, for instance—labeled in block letters on a wooden paint stirrer.

I begin working my way over to Z but before I reach the final letter, I spy a kid-sized birdhouse painted with colorful flowers that draws me into an adjacent area dedicated to all things avian. This Bird Garden had originally been installed by Marturano's sixth-grade students as part of a unit on bird ecology, so it is filled with plants that provide food and shelter for several species of songbirds.

Then I notice a dinosaur-shaped slide back in the direction I had come so I wander over to explore the Mesozoic Memories Garden. It features the types of plants that existed in prehistoric times, such as ferns, palms, and ginkgos. The recent makeover included the addition of many new plants to this area. Beasley gestures to the rope-and-post fence that surrounds them, which is also new. "Hopefully it will protect the smaller plants for a while," he says, until they become more trample-proof.

## Save the Date!

**2017 National Children & Youth Garden Symposium, July 12-15, Greater Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington, area.**



Arlene Marturano (center) and Todd Beasley welcome a group of visitors to the Carolina Children's Garden as part of the 2016 National Children & Youth Garden Symposium in July.

Such modifications may be necessary while establishing young plantings, but one of the garden's best features, according to Beasley, is that "kids are not constrained by structured rules and pathways." This means they can literally run wild if they want to and engage in the sort of free play that encourages creativity and learning. I realize that my own meandering progress around the garden shows that adults aren't constrained either!

This freedom to roam sounds all well and good, particularly when considering the boundless energy youngsters seem to need to burn, but Beasley believes it serves a much larger purpose. "Natural areas that allow imagination, discovery, and exploration to happen," he says, "are how many of us become interested in environmentalism." Instilling that interest is vital to gener-



**Left: Student volunteers repair Eeyore's hut in Pooh's Corner. Right: School kids enjoy an activity during a visit to the Carolina Children's Garden.**

ating future stewards of the earth who will be moved to protect the plants, animals, and landscapes they learned to love.

### OPEN TO ALL, THANKS TO MANY HANDS

Beasley feels that another of the garden's best qualities is that "it is a free garden that allows access for all socio-economic demographics and diverse cultures." And access it, they do. Open seven days a week, the garden is frequented by "homeschoolers, family and organization picnics, moms' clubs, prayer groups, dog-walkers, and many others from morning until gates are closed in the evening," Marturano says. Occasionally, the garden offers special events such as an Arbor Day celebration and nature walks, which draw even more visitors.

Consequently, one of the crucial roles of the Friends organization is finding creative ways to make all of this possible. A "reindog" parade and costume contest at Christmas-time has proven to be a successful fundraiser, for example. Grants provide funds for everything from a part-time educator hired a few years ago to the supplies for the recent makeover. But perhaps most essential has been the "friend-raising" to secure helping hands and needed supplies. Marturano points to the garden's main entrance to illustrate. Its brick path and the plants around it came about as a service project for the members of the Greater Columbia Landscape Association.

Several other groups such as Master Gardeners, scouts, and college students participate in monthly service days to help with garden maintenance tasks. Local woodworkers, sculptors, and other artists contrib-

ute their skills for specific projects. Others donate their expertise, such as naturalists and birders who help out with programs.

Area businesses have pitched in, too. A local garden center created Pooh's Corner, complete with painted plywood characters from the Winnie-the-Pooh stories and a "Kanga and Roo Sandpit" where kids can dig to their hearts' content. An independent bookstore sponsored the nearby Reading Garden, a shady nook tucked into a stand of native longleaf pines where visitors are encouraged to indulge in the printed word. Even the garden's current Master Plan is a generous gift, created *pro bono* by a Columbia-based landscape architect.

### Visit the Garden



#### CAROLINA CHILDREN'S GARDEN

900 Clemson Road  
Columbia, SC 29229  
[www.carolinachildrengarden.org](http://www.carolinachildrengarden.org)

### EVEN BIGGER DREAMS

That Master Plan, on display in a large kiosk that I pause beside as our tour concludes, indicates there's still much more to come. The drawing shows a native wildflower area and a play area made of grassy moguls joining the existing gardens. Log structures for climbing and a "workshop" site filled with sticks, rocks, and other natural items for construction play add to the fun. A walking path unobtrusively connects everything.

The physical evolution of the children's garden is clearly a major focus, but Marturano hopes to develop more educational programming as well. "Some people see this as a community park," she says, "but I have bigger dreams." In the past, grants have allowed the garden to offer a formal environmental education program that served as many as 1,500 schoolchildren in an academic year. Building on that success is a no-brainer in Marturano's mind. "Gardening is an organizing thread for education," she says, meaning that it can be used to teach so many different concepts and subjects from geography to engineering. She sees limitless potential for using the children's garden for both informal and more curated learning.

The garden certainly has ambitious goals, but if its past accomplishments are any indication, there's no doubt it will find a way to make them happen. For now, this treasured part of the Columbia community will continue doing all it can to infuse kids with a sense of wonder for plants and nature. 🌿

*Viveka Neveln is associate editor of The American Gardener.*