Seen through the prism of imagination and creative play, plants and gardens can serve many roles for children. They can be teachers, healers, providers, and entertainers, to name just a few. Determining how to capitalize on this versatility to best engage kids in the natural world is what the American Horticultural Society’s National Children & Youth Garden Symposium (NCYGS) is all about.

Now in its 22nd year, this event provides an annual forum where people who share a passion for connecting kids to gardening and nature can exchange ideas and best practices. This summer’s symposium will take place July 17 to 19 in Columbus, Ohio, a fitting venue given the city’s widespread reputation for embracing innovative approaches to everything from education and research to the arts and community building.

Inspiring Gardens
The Buckeye State’s capital city is home to a wealth of public gardens, parks, schools, and organizations replete with inspiring examples of engaging kids with

The Buckeye State welcomes the 22nd annual National Children & Youth Garden Symposium this summer.

BY VIVEKA NEVELN

Schoolchildren explore the whimsically designed Pollinator Garden at Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens.
plants. Highlights from many of these will be packed into the three-day symposium, but the crown jewel is theNCYGS 2014 host, the Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens.

The Conservatory is where “children’s informal learning, creating a sense of community, growing healthy food, and knowing the positive effects of nature all come together,” says its Education Manager Mark Miller. It achieves all of this through its world-class gardens and plant collections, exemplary programs for all ages, and extensive outreach into the community.

Two of the Conservatory’s biggest attractions are an annual butterfly exhibit and the Dale Chihuly collection of glass art, both housed in a historic, Victorian-style glasshouse. This structure is also home to several major plant biomes such as rainforest and desert, which offer interactive learning experiences for school groups.NCYGS attendees will receive behind-the-scenes tours of these and other highlights, including the four-acre Scotts Miracle-Gro Community Garden Campus, which serves as an outdoor classroom for hosting a variety of programs.

**SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE**

Along with garden tours, the symposium will feature “three outstanding keynote speakers who represent a variety of perspectives,” says AHS Executive Director Tom Underwood. The first will be Hope Taft, first lady of Ohio from 1999 to 2007. During Taft’s tenure, she focused on youth and community initiatives, and was a driving force behind the creation of the Ohio Heritage Garden at the Governor’s Residence. This garden showcases the beauty and diversity of Ohio’s native plants to its thousands of visitors annually. Using the Heritage Garden as an example, Taft will welcome symposium attendees with a botanical tour of the state and describe how native plants create an important sense of place.

Amanda Maria Edmonds, founder and executive director of Growing Hope in Ypsilanti, Michigan, will speak about how edible plants can be a powerful tool for influencing positive community change. Edmonds’s nonprofit organization grew out of a simple school garden created in 1999. It had such an impact on the surrounding community that before long, many more sites and garden-based learning programs followed, prompting the establishment of Growing Hope in 2003 to lead these efforts. At its core, this organization is about empowering people of all ages to grow and eat local, healthy food together. During her keynote presentation, Edmonds will illuminate the important part that children

Originally built in 1895, the Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens’ iconic Palm House remains a focal point in the landscape.
OPTIONAL TRIPS BEFORE AND AFTER THE SYMPOSIUM

PRE-SYMPOSIUM EXCURSIONS (JULY 16)
Two optional pre-symposium trips offer participants a chance to extend their Ohio experience. One trip will be to nearby Dayton to visit three different gardens. The other trip will focus on Columbus-area gardens.

- Option 1: A Day in Dayton
About an hour’s drive from Columbus, Dayton is home to a number of exemplary gardens. One stop will be the 189-acre Cox Arboretum, which is part of Ohio’s Five Rivers MetroPark system. In addition to year-round educational programs that teach children and adults about sustainable horticulture, plant science, and conservation, the arboretum also partners with area schools on programming and hosts the teacher field school, PLANT (Putting Learning and Nature Together!). Participants will meet the staff, explore the grounds, and learn about various programs and tools used to engage children and families.

The group also will go to the Miami Valley School to see its Zorniger Environmental Laboratory. The Z-Lab, as it is informally called, features learning gardens and a “state-of-the-art, 800-square-foot, geothermal structure made from stucco and cedar timbers,” explains Z-Lab Coordinator Patricia DeLotell. Participants will see how the Z-Lab supports curricula for its Middle School students and lower grades through collaborative projects and activities.

Another stop will be Wegerzyn Gardens MetroPark to visit its Children’s Discovery Garden. Opened in 2006 as a child-friendly place to interact with nature through play and learning, it comprises habitat areas and whimsical themed gardens for young visitors and their adult companions to explore together. Its staff will share the history of the Children’s Discovery Garden, explain what they believe “makes it work,” and discuss how the garden has evolved over the years to continue to meet the needs of visitors.

POST-SYMPOSIUM TRIP (JULY 19)
After NCYGS 2014 wraps up, an optional trip to enjoy more of the Columbus area will start in the neighboring city of Gahanna, which is home to the Ohio Herb Education Center. Here, participants will use all their senses during a workshop on how to use herbs to introduce kids to the plant world. Not only are most herbs easy to grow, they also lend themselves to a variety of kid-friendly crafts. The group will learn techniques for working with several herbs and then create hands-on herbal projects such as wreaths, pounding for dye, and making paper.

Afterwards, the group will head back into Columbus for a tour of the Topiary Park in the downtown area. Its seven acres are a three-dimensional topiary version of A Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte, the famous French Post-Impressionist painting by Georges Seurat. The only known representation of a painting using topiary, it has become one of Columbus’s top attractions. This trip will conclude with dinner at The Table. This recently opened Columbus restaurant is known for its funky, relaxed atmosphere and its French-inspired cuisine using ingredients that are either sourced locally or as sustainably as possible.

—V.N.
and youth can play, and how Growing Hope effectively engages them.

For kids, the health benefits of plants extend well beyond their contributions in a nutritious diet. The Natural Learning Initiative (NLI) at North Carolina State University facilitates research that identifies and quantifies these benefits as part of its mission to promote outdoor environments for play and learning. By sharing some of the compelling findings of this research, NLI Director Robin Moore will show why nature is vital to a child’s development and discuss the kind of elements natural spaces should contain in order to actively engage young minds.

**SHARING SUCCESSES**

For the teachers, public garden staff, landscape designers, community leaders, and other participants from all over the country who attend the symposium, one of the biggest draws is to learn from each other. Hearing how peers have successfully tackled common challenges can spark valuable ideas and solutions. More than 50 educational sessions will examine topics such as what it takes to run school and community garden programs, how to harness technology to help kids connect with the natural world, and the value of play to encourage discovery and learning.

Several sessions will delve deeper into the programs and resources of the Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens. Representatives from some of the optional field trip locations (see the opposite page for more details), such as Miami Valley School in Dayton and Inniswood Metro Gardens in Westerville, also will offer further insight into their respective institutions and experiences.

All of these sessions will take place at Ohio State University’s Ohio Union, which is an impressive LEED Silver Certified green building completed in 2010. To achieve this sustainability recognition, it implements such measures as water efficient landscaping, active stormwater management, and an innovative “pulper” system that captures and composts food waste from the facility’s wastewater.

**SAMPLING LOCAL FLAVOR**

What trip to a different city would be complete without experiencing some of its cultural and culinary highlights? According to Lori Kingston, marketing director for the Conservatory, Columbus boasts “historic neighborhoods, a great food and arts scene, and a vibrant openness that might surprise you.”

On one evening of the symposium, participants will have the chance to visit the historic, indoor North Market in downtown Columbus. Here visitors will find vendors offering everything from artisan baked goods and cheeses to a wide variety of fresh produce, flowers, spices, and prepared food. With so much to spark new ideas and tempt the senses, Columbus promises to provide something for every symposium attendee. This one-of-a-kind event will not only showcase the region’s thriving youth gardening programs and green spaces, but also will leave participants excited to get back home and implement what they have learned.

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

For more details about the 2014 symposium and to register, visit the AHS website at www.ahs.org/ncygs. Plus get updates by following @AHS_ncygs on Twitter.