



# Expanding your options

Interpretation is not just about guided walks, brochures and signs – there are many other ways to make your garden come alive. Roving interpretation and discovery stations involve personal contact between an interpreter and visitors. They also enable you to adapt to visitors' interests and needs which makes them particularly effective. They are however time and energy intensive. You might consider training volunteers or part-time staff to increase your 'interpretive presence' in the garden.

## Roving interpretation

A roving interpreter is someone who roams around the garden and chats to visitors, drawing their attention to things of interest in the plant displays. A skilled interpreter can quickly assess the visitors' interests and make a connection with their personal experience. Many of the skills and techniques used for interpretive walks apply to roving interpretation. The most important thing to remember is that your main role is to help visitors explore and interpret what they see, not just to impress them with your knowledge.

Questions are a very valuable interpretive tool. You can use questions to focus attention on something, to engage visitors in creative and critical thinking or to encourage discovery and further enquiry. How visitors respond to you (whether they feel free to share their observations, or just keep dead quiet) will depend on how you phrase the question. Asking and responding to questions is a skill which can be developed. See Box 7 for some ideas on how to ask questions which facilitate learning.

Bear in mind that visitors will respond differently to a roving interpreter. Some people just want to be left alone whereas others enjoy learning something new. You'll need to learn to read the situation and be sensitive to people's needs. Sometimes visitors seem a little surprised when you start talking to them, especially if they don't know that you are a staff

## Box 7 The Art of Asking Questions

When asking questions, remember that the intention is not to test the visitors' knowledge, but to start up a conversation with them and facilitate a process of learning.

- Start off with simple questions which relate to peoples' observations or personal experience. They are easy for visitors to answer (and therefore non-threatening) and enable you to find out more about them.  
e.g. Have you ever tasted marula beer? Here is the fruit from which the beer is made.  
Does anyone recognise this plant?
- Once people are feeling at ease you can ask more challenging questions which help them to discover relationships between things. Remember to ask open-ended questions which allow many possible answers.  
e.g. How does this plant differ from that one?  
Why do you think that plants have sharp thorns or spikes?  
What is this bee doing? How does this benefit the plant?
- Give people enough time to think and come up with an answer and listen to what they say – it's your chance to learn something!
- When people answer, credit them with 'great' or 'that's a good idea' or 'I never thought of that'. A positive response encourages people to participate and share their ideas.
- Avoid asking questions which contain the answer. They're boring!  
e.g. This plant species smells like mint, doesn't it? (better to ask: what does this remind you of?)
- Don't ask too many questions. Keep an eye on your visitors to see whether they are still interested.

member. So it's a good idea to wear a name tag with the logo of your botanical garden to identify yourself.

### **Discovery stations**

Discovery stations, also known as touch carts, are usually manned by interpretive staff or volunteers. A variety of materials (e.g. plant products, interesting seed pods, bark samples) are set up on a table in the garden. Visitors usually approach the table out of curiosity which gives the interpreter the opportunity to chat about the exhibits and demonstrate interesting points. People are encouraged to touch, feel or smell the materials and ask questions about them. It is a very versatile and personalised form of interpretation because you can easily adjust to the audience, whether it is a group of tourists, a family, visiting scientists or a school group.

Children exploring objects on a discovery cart called 'Sense-ational Plants' (Brooklyn Botanic Garden, USA).



### Themes for discovery stations – some examples

- Seeds on the move (seed dispersal)
- Plant go-betweens (pollinators)
- Plants in our lives (useful plants)
- The medicine chest (medicinal plants)
- Musical plants (rattles, shakers and instruments made of plant products)
- Colours of the desert/rainforest

Discovery stations may be planned according to a specific theme. In the Brooklyn Botanic Garden they have a touch cart called 'Sense-ational Plants' which invites people to explore plants with all their senses:

*Smell* – people can sniff plastic containers with different aromatic plants (mint, spices, ginger root)

*Listen* – a variety of things to rattle (seed pods, bamboo)

*Touch* – plants with different textures (soft, spiky, woolly, . . .)

*Look* – magnifying glasses to see interesting plant details

Sometimes a special movable cart or trolley is made, so that it is easy to wheel into the garden and remove at the end of a session. Key ingredients for a successful discovery station are:

- Interesting specimens or artefacts to capture people's attention and have something to talk about.
- A person who is skilled at interacting with adults and children and 'leads' them to make their own discoveries.
- A central theme to focus people's attention so that learning takes place.
- A good location in the garden (shady, enough visitor traffic).



## **Specially for children**

Is your garden visited by many children and family groups? How do you cater for kids who aren't part of a guided school visit? Treasure hunts and orientation games are usually very popular and help to keep them out of mischief. They are very worthwhile from a garden management point of view because by engaging young minds, you avoid potential destruction in the garden!

Interpretive walks for children can include storytelling and activities involving their creativity and imagination. If you are planning a written form of interpretation for children and families, avoid making it look like a worksheet with lots of questions to fill in. Include activities which will focus their attention on specific plants or animals and keep the emphasis on fun, with minimal need for writing. Remember that if you design the activities or games around a central theme, the experience can be both entertaining and educational.

## **Educational theatre**

Educational theatre involves the use of drama to communicate a message to the public. The message (theme) may be 'Let's reduce our waste and recycle', or 'Help conserve our flora – our well-being depends on plants'. Performers may enact a short play in the garden or go on a 'character walkabout' – i.e. play the role of specific characters and interact informally with visitors in the garden.

Educational theatre is a lively, engaging form of interpretation which lends itself to the exploration of environmental issues. Conservation issues are, by their very nature, complex and usually involve different stakeholders with vested interests. Role-playing offers an opportunity to represent these different viewpoints.

Let's say there is a piece of land with a very rare plant species which is threatened with extinction. In this case the stakeholders may be; a local farmer who wants to plough the land for growing crops; a property developer who wants to buy the land and build houses; and a conservationist who wants the flora to be conserved. Each performer represents one of the stakeholders and acts out his/her interests. The farmer, developer and conservationist may argue

among one another about why they need the land. This debate will help the audience to understand the underlying complexity of conservation issues. The performers may involve the audience in the debate and encourage them to try to find a solution or compromise which is acceptable to all parties.

Educational theatre is often developed in collaboration with a local drama or poetry group or with students from a performing arts school. As with all forms of interpretation, you need to decide on the purpose of the play and identify a theme. The actors interpret this theme using their performing skills. The end result can be very entertaining and educational, and provide visitors with a memorable and enjoyable experience.

