Digs, twigs, fossils, and figs are all part of the plans for a children’s garden at the South Carolina Botanical Garden (SCBG). Envisioned by children in the Sprouting Wing’s Program, designed by Clemson University horticulture students, and led by the Botanical Garden staff, plans for a new children’s garden are underway.

Garden manager James Arnold and SCBG staff selected a site between the Hayden Conference Center and the Sprouting Wing’s Greenhouse because of the need to expand existing after school activity centers located in this area. Amy Craddock, Coordinator of the Sprouting Wings Program, an after-school program for children, and Lisa Wagner, Director of Educational Programs at SCBG, communicated the need for a variety of spaces to support the expansion of the after school and inquiry based learning programs that SCBG is known for.


Masterplanners Colleen Hoffman and Eddie Wilkerson tie these varied gardens together with a winding path imprinted with symbols leading to each theme garden. Children may follow dinosaur footprints into the fossil dig, or identify leaf prints of medicinal plants leading to the Ethnobotany garden. Colleen and Eddie note that “the garden will provide areas to relax in the shade, play in the sun, and explore and learn through nature.”

Children arriving on school busses will leave the parking lot and enter the garden through an “Arbored Entry Garden.” Madison Turnblad oriented the arbor to frame the distant view of a Blue Atlas cedar just above the “Food for Thought Garden” designed by Chris Dicks. Sprouting Wings children will become farmers, growing their own fruit, vegetables, herbs, and flowers including figs, sweet peppers, basil, and dwarf sunflowers. Working with volunteers, the children discover where their food comes from and learn about horticulture and nutrition. Chris surrounds the vegetable plots with a “Finger Garden” incorporating fuzzy plants like lamb’s ears that people love to touch.

Paleontologist Christian Cicimurri, Curator of Education for the SCBG Geology Museum, has fossils to share, and high on her wish list is an outdoor space to bury them. Clemson extension horticulturist Bob Polomski has designed her dream with a “Dinosaur Dig Garden” to provide visitors “the opportunity to see and interact with prehistoric plants and dinosaur fossils. Ginkgos, palms, and ferns create a prehistoric feel, and children can dig for fossils in two large sandpits. Brush away the sand to uncover
the ‘fossilized’ remains of Velociraptor and Triceratops, or climb on a Parasaurolophus. Look carefully, and you will see a few dinosaurs peeking at you from among the grasses and trees.”

Matt Haynes provides transition from the prehistoric discovery center through a dinosaur skeleton arbor to a more native outdoor classroom defined by a serpentine gathering space. “With the help of interpretative signs and selected plants, this garden will teach children about the treasures of the South Carolina Botanical Garden, both today and in past millennia.”

A “Hide and Seek” garden incorporates a labyrinth hidden behind a nature based sculpture like the “Crucible” by Herb Parker. “The kids will have to search to find the labyrinth,” says designer Nich Maidment.

To escape the hot sun on a southern August midday walk, wander through Lea Steele’s “Woodland Wonderland.” You may stumble upon a “stump hut”, a larger than life interactive bird’s nest, or a magical circle of misting mushrooms. Lee has included a place to “teach kids about tree roots and native plants such as magnolias, rhododendrons, and woodland wildflowers.”

Water is said to be the most desired and the least provided element in a child’s play world. Renee Keydoszius hopes to remedy that problem through her “Wonders of Water Garden.” “Upper and lower ponds connected by a stream of waterfalls serve as the backbone to this garden. A wooden deck reaches out over the lower pond to allow children to observe fish and other pond wildlife. An area for carnivorous plants is located near the pathway so that children can easily see how plants such as Venus flytrap and pitcher plants eat insects. A fiddlehead patio with a child size bench is hidden beneath the branches of a weeping willow, providing a secret hiding place to sit and observe the garden.”

Ben Simpson, a “Habitat Steward” with the South Carolina Wildlife Federation, designed a Carolina Fence Garden to showcase our state symbols. He included yellow jessamine, our state flower, blue granite, our state stone, Indiangrass, our state grass, and a nesting box for the Carolina Wren, our state bird.

Inspired by utilitarian gardens created hundreds of years ago, the “Ethnobotany Garden” was designed by Stephanie Zabel “to educate children on the wide variety of plants and their uses, specifically as dyes, fibers, and medicines.” Graduate student Meghan Baker hopes to take samples from the future “Ethnobotany Garden” to local K-12 schools as part of an educational outreach program she is developing.

Daniel Phail recommends transforming an old storage building into a cottage garden tool shed with a “shaded summer seat and bright winter place where a person may enjoy a colorful view and aroma of clematis.” Bryan Calhoun also created views from a gazebo his “Bold View Butterfly Garden.” Building on Lisa Wagner’s existing “Pollinator Garden”, he incorporated two types of plants to attract butterflies. Bryan says: “Host plants such as spicebush provide a place for caterpillars to feed and lay eggs. Nectar plants such as butterfly bush and lantana are colorful and attract many different species of butterflies.”

Large class groups can convene in the “Playful Plaza Garden” outside of the Hayden Nature Center where Brad Stowe hopes to “stimulate one’s senses with beautiful year round color. He has included such plants as columbine for the spring, daylilies for the summer, Black-eyed Susans for the fall, and ‘Nellie R. Stevens’ holly for winter interest.
Amy Craddock and Sprouting Wing’s assistant program coordinator Lisa Chancellor like to have both large and small informal meeting areas outside, so Phil Martin designed a resting-place for them at “The Terrace Sitting Garden.” Here garden visitors can “gather and socialize while viewing seasonal annuals and perennials which the Sprouting Wings children have grown.” These children ‘sprout wings’ while discovering the earth through gardening, nature, and community service activities.

Students enrolling in spring classes are eager to begin the installation of the theme garden designs. Graduate student Carri Carver Wallace, teaching assistant for the Horticulture 308 design class, plans to help implement ideas. With funding support from a USDA Challenges in Higher Education Grant focusing on using a service learning methodology, Carri and an interdisciplinary group of students and faculty from Clemson University are working together in an on-going multi-grade collaboration to design and install sustainable community projects. John Kelly, Director of SCBG, and Vice President of Public Service and Agriculture at Clemson, encourages service learning as a powerful pedagogy for teaching students critical thinking skills, communication skills, and technical skills while facilitating community outreach and service.

Many thanks go to USDA and to the Sustainable Universities Initiative and the General Mills Foundation for their funding support of this project. Matching funds are being sought so that materials can be purchased to begin the installation of retaining walls, decks, plazas, arbors, pools, waterfalls, sculptures, steps, and plants within the gardens. Naming opportunities are available for each garden and within the gardens. Please contact Amy Craddock at 656-7340 or Lisa Wagner at 656-3679 if you are interested in partnering with us to engage children in working, playing, learning, and discovering the wonders of gardening and nature in partnership with Clemson University college students and SCBG staff and volunteers.

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