

‘Botanic Gardens: “Walled, stranded arks” or Environments for learning?’

The lack of considered and reflective commentary on botanic garden education has had a significant impact upon the visibility of botanic gardens in educational arenas. This research study considers how botanic gardens are currently exploring a range of institutional and societal identities, and more specifically, considers the role of botanic gardens in promoting their use for educational purposes. The key question addressed by the research is: are botanic gardens perceived as environments for learning, or are they ‘walled, stranded arks’ with few key holders?

In exploring this question, the study critically examines evolving notions of botanic gardens, with particular reference to their emerging role in education for children aged between 7 and 11. The research considers both historical and contemporary evidence. Much of the material for the historical section of the research is drawn from primary resources existing in botanic gardens archives or collected from personal narratives. Three main case-study gardens are considered:

- Chelsea Physic Garden, London, UK
- Kirstenbosch Botanical Garden, Cape Town, South Africa
- The New York Botanical Garden, New York, USA

The study explores both learners’ impressions of the botanic garden, as well as teachers’ notions of botanic gardens as an educational resource. The contemporary section on learners utilises data originating from a largely qualitative, longitudinal study conducted by the author of three primary schools which regularly visited the Chelsea Physic Garden in London.

Key findings from the study include:

- Botanic garden education for children has a long history containing a rich mixture of pedagogical role-models
- Teachers and learners value the pedagogies of formal and ‘free-play’ type activities in the botanic garden environment
- Curriculum frameworks are the main factors in teachers’ choice of subjects to be covered during a visit to a botanic garden
- Many gardens still struggle to make a real commitment to an educational role in ways which permeate the scientific and horticultural work of the garden.

This research study challenges botanic gardens to develop an institutional culture which places the education of children at the heart of their practice by encouraging dialogue within and beyond the botanic garden community.