

Historic Bartram's Garden: Working with Community

In 1728, John Bartram established a botanical garden on his Schuylkill River farm, cultivating seeds and plants he collected throughout the American colonies. Once the setting where the New World's native plants were documented and preserved, Bartram's Garden now nurtures the well-being of its surrounding community. Bartram's Garden is a National Historic Landmark and National Recreation Trail site owned by the Fairmount Park Commission and operated by the John Bartram Association. It consists of John Bartram's home and outbuildings, and 46 acres that include the original botanical garden, a public park, riverfront, a restored tidal wetland, and a seventeen-acre meadow. Bartram's Garden is located in Southwest Philadelphia, an area riddled with severe environmental challenges. Bordered by the Bartram Village Housing Project and a vacant industrial site slated to become a waste transfer facility, Bartram's has involved itself with the struggles of its surrounding neighborhood. Led by Executive Director William LeFevre, Bartram's staff and Board focuses much of their efforts on bolstering the community through leadership, outreach and service.

Among its activities, Bartram's Garden provides paid six-week internships for up to ten John Bartram High School students, offers free use of its facilities for community meetings and special events, and assists *JustRow!*, a new rowing program for minority students that docks at Bartram's. Using the garden as a basis for outreach, Bartram's staff gardener provides one-on-one assistance to community and school gardens. After years of this service, the Bartram Village Housing Project's staff now looks to Bartram's for assistance in improving its grounds with plants provided by the Garden.

This year, Bartram's Garden has played a pivotal role in the fight against a new waste transfer facility. The proposed facility would profoundly impact the Garden, the only green space in a community already congested with industrial sites. The issue is still under consideration by City Council and awaits resolution.

In the meantime, Bartram's continues to upgrade its programs and its buildings. In 1999, with funding from the Heritage Philadelphia Program, Bartram's restored the home of John Bartram; in 2003, it built an environmental-friendly "green" office space, and is in the process now of restoring other dependency buildings on the property. It has contracted with a tour boat to provide a ride on the Schuylkill from the Waterworks to Bartram's dock.

The accomplishments of Bartram's Garden demonstrate the importance of collaborating with community partners. Bartram's fulfills its mission by identifying community needs and working with local interests to meet those needs. In the process, Bartram's Garden provides meaningful connections to its historic past, its present struggles, and the community's quality of life in the future. As a result, the people of Southwest Philadelphia look to Bartram's for leadership, and value its historic site and landscapes as a source of community pride.

For more information on Bartram's Garden's community outreach activities or to tour the site, call 215-729-5281.