

# IMAGINING THE FUTURE

## THE GARDENS AT ELM BANK BICENTENARY MASTER PLAN



PHOTO COURTESY DOUGLAS LYONS PHOTOGRAPHY

*The Draft Master Plan Executive Summary*

*October 23, 2018*

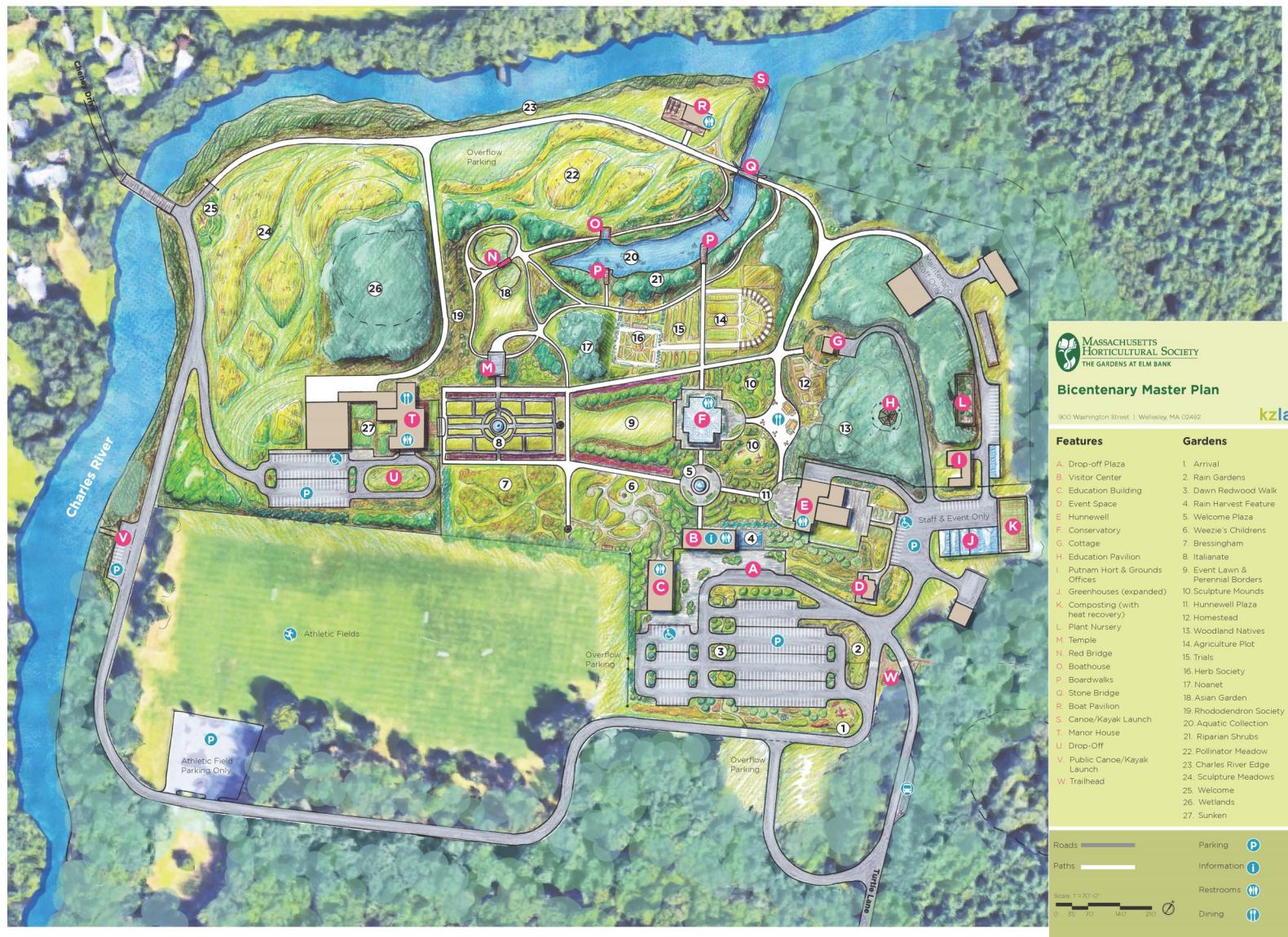


MASSACHUSETTS  
HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

THE GARDENS AT ELM BANK

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## Plants, the Planet, and our Environment

### A Bicentenary Master Plan

*Founded in 1829, Massachusetts Horticultural Society is dedicated to encouraging the science and practice of horticulture and to developing the public's enjoyment, appreciation, and understanding of plants and the environment.*

The appreciation and understanding of plants and our environment has never been more relevant than in this era of climate change. From the air we breathe to the food we eat and the beauty of our surroundings, plants are central to our lives. The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew estimates that there are some 392,000 plants known to science worldwide and that some 21% are at risk of extinction due to habitat loss and climate change. We have a responsibility to address these challenges so central to our mission.

Massachusetts Horticultural Society has spent the last year developing a vision, with the help of members, friends, and neighbors. This vision is a multifaceted investment program and business strategy to deliver our mission well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Building on our unique combination of formal gardens, agricultural plots, natural areas, greenhouses and interactive "hands-on" programming connected with internet-based resources, The Gardens at Elm Bank aspires to be at the forefront of New England garden destinations, horticultural knowledge, and education.

We are well located within the metropolitan Boston area, 45 minutes from the central city and within 20 miles of more than 2.8 million people. Approximately 20% of this population is between the ages of 30-44 and includes young families looking for garden programming. Another significant population, those over the age of 65, represent 14% of the population and are particularly important with regards to membership and volunteering. This presents a wonderful opportunity for outreach and engagement.

Our site consists of a long-term (99 yr) lease of 36 acres within the 180-acre Elm Bank Reservation owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It is an unusual and mutually beneficial public-private partnership. The Reservation in its entirety is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is surrounded on three sides by the Charles River and supports an aquifer that provides a public water supply for neighboring towns. Recreational activities include walking trails, a canoe launch, and athletic fields.

In our twenty years at the hub of this unusual site, Massachusetts Horticultural Society has restored much of the historic landscape. Extensive work has also been carried out on five of the core historic structures. This works includes the renovation of the Hunnewell Building. This historic carriage house is a beautiful event venue that many local individuals and organizations rent for their own special occasions.

We have also cultivated 16 acres for display gardens, and have grown a loyal following through educational programming and events. This work has focused on the southern half of the site including the Trial Gardens, Weezie's Garden for Children, the Bressingham Perennial Garden and the formal Italianate Garden. The northern half of the site has been anchored by the display gardens of the New England Unit of the Herb Society of America, the Rhododendron Society, the Daylily Society, and the Noanett Garden Club. This leaves substantial land for future development. That future is now as we strive to integrate the entire 36 acres into a visitor-friendly and compelling experience.

Reaffirming our mission, our varied stakeholders have worked together to set forth an ambitious but carefully phased new plan that will guide us to our Bicentenary in 2029 and beyond. Work will occur in multiple phases and will emphasize expanding garden diversity, improving and preserving our historic cultural landscape and buildings, and providing amenities for a special and welcoming visitor experience that will address the challenges and opportunities of our horticultural future.

The plan sets out a capital improvement program that has a 20-year time horizon and balances expansion with operating requirements. It is a flexible and adaptable approach with an early concentration on actions that will:

- ◆ Respect and enhance our site's history and culture
- ◆ Expand garden diversity
- ◆ Provide a visitor experience that engages, delights and educates
- ◆ Maintain the good ... the Elm Bank that our stakeholders know and cherish

### **Respect and Enhance our Site's History and Culture**

- ◆ Restore the Temple Garden and the Asian Garden designed by the Olmsted Brothers, elements of the National Register designation.
- ◆ Develop a working agricultural garden in the area that once supported the estate farm garden. The vegetable gardens will illustrate what can be accomplished on small lots or urban spaces for the interested homeowner.
- ◆ Connect the Asian Garden to the canal that was dug in the 1920s and replant the canal with wetland and aquatic plants.

## Expand Garden Diversity

- ◆ Plant gardens that highlight local and foreign ecosystems which will provide lessons on sustainable gardening methods and plant choices, such as native meadows, pollinator-friendly gardens, collections of interesting plant species, woodland gardens, riparian gardens, and xeriscape gardens.
- ◆ Open view sheds and access to the Charles River to introduce visitors to that ecosystem.
- ◆ Provide garden areas that present homeowners with examples of small space plantings.
- ◆ Create outdoor workshop space for "hands-on" garden programs.
- ◆ Add adaptive and inclusive garden displays such as sensory gardens and raised beds.

## Provide a Visitor Experience that Engages, Delights, and Educates

- ◆ Construct a Visitors Interpretive Center that will be a portal to The Gardens at Elm Bank. The space will welcome visitors, provide essential amenities and provide opportunities to learn from exhibits, staff, and volunteers.
- ◆ Improve signage and programmatic interpretation to extend visitor experience.
- ◆ Integrate new technology into the visitor experience while maintaining an "un-plugged" natural experience for others. Expanded use of web-based resources will allow visitors to learn both at the site and remotely.
- ◆ Introduce sculpture within planted spaces. Areas will accommodate temporary as well as permanent installations with the emphasis on temporary and changing displays.
- ◆ Expand greenhouse capacity to demonstrate sustainable practices in greenhouse design such as using waste heat from compost to provide winter heat. Greenhouses will also provide four season display space for visitors and four-season educational space.
- ◆ Assure that sustainable building and planting methods and the reduction of our carbon footprint are priorities in all new construction and landscape initiatives.

## Maintain the Good

- ◆ Manage the strong core of our cultivated gardens (Weezie's Garden for Children, Bressingham Garden and the Italianate Garden) to the highest horticultural standards.
- ◆ Work closely with Mass Department of Conservation and Recreation which owns the site's roadway to improve circulation, safety, and parking for all users of the Reservation.
- ◆ Work closely with Mass Department of Transportation which owns the two bridges in the Reservation to provide bus access to the site for all users of the Reservation.
- ◆ Balance the phasing of planned capital projects with increasing revenue needed for staffing and operations. Each phase should project improved visitor experiences and increased visitation with revenues needed to support growth.
- ◆ Continue to seek a development partner interested in a complementary use of the Manor House.

This plan is flexible, adaptable and ambitious. It is based on the premises set forth on the Massachusetts Horticultural Society mission statement. It is based on the fact that people of all ages and backgrounds love gardens and they love the variety and inspiration found in the plant world. And it is based on a strategy that will expand our ability to engage, delight, and educate greater numbers of members, friends, and visitors with the completion of each phase.