



The Sounds Of Nature

*A horticultural oasis
reimagined for music
and play*

By Jody Ashfield



Botanical gardens are often thought of as serene settings, spaces for horticulturalists and garden enthusiasts to discover and research flora and fauna. Research and education at botanical gardens around the world have been vital in protecting endangered plant species. However, a botanical garden in Florida has started to reimagine what these gardens can look like by creating an innovative space in which play and music coexist alongside the important horticultural work the gardens carry out.

The First Notes

Nestled in a highly populated area of Largo, Fla. is Florida Botanical Gardens, a green oasis where the region's children can explore and enjoy the gardens thanks to a new play area, the Majeed Discovery Garden, designed and built in 2023.

The gardens are set in a 100-acre park managed by the Pinellas County Parks and Conservation Resources Department. Created over 20 years ago, the gardens aim to inspire and educate visitors; however, in the past couple of years, the community at the gardens recognized the setting didn't truly appeal to children. The Florida Botanical Gardens Foundation sought to make the space more inclusive, and set out to fundraise three million dollars and design an area for play.

John Thomas, board president of the Foundation, says, "There was plenty of opportunity for children to look and see the gardens but no activities for them to touch and explore." The ambition was to create an educational play area that was multi-sensory while reflecting nature.

With McKay Creek running alongside the gardens and a large pond, the play area needed to promote nature in a playful, interactive way. With a generous donation from The Majeed Foundation, the organizers engaged with conservation consultants to explore





possibilities for the gardens. They identified a large site and, with a grant from the Florida Department of State and The Berolzheimer Foundation, work began.

Thomas says, “We wanted to create a master plan for future needs of the park, and after realizing the focus of the park has been on education for adults and not children, we set about to make a change and create a space where children can be interactive, including creating music!”

A Musical Destination

The gardens already included some percussion instruments, but with this new project, there was scope to create a Music Forest that was truly inspired by nature.

Curtis McMahon, a landscape architect from Coyle and Caron Landscape Architecture, who worked on the project, says, “Our brief was to create a place for hands-on and experiential education in an outdoor setting, with a goal to connect children of all ages and abilities to nature. We came up with a number of multipurpose structures that could be climbed. The Pollinator Landing has a stage for presentations and performances, the Trunk Jump has wooden poles at different heights to test balance and strength, whilst the Music Forest contains large outdoor musical instruments, which are designed to reflect nature.”

McMahon found the overall design process very simple, saying, “The main idea for the children’s garden was one garden with lots of different spaces for children to explore, interact, and play. For the Music Forest, the goal was to provide a more auditory experience, and we had a





lot of inspiration regarding the sounds of nature, such as the sound of bamboo knocking together or wind rustling through leaves. There is a wildlife component as well, as lots of the plants are native, bird-friendly plants.”

McMahon came across Percussion Play when researching instruments for the Music Forest, wanting to find instruments that children could play cooperatively. He says, “We ended up having the Cajon ‘drum’ circle and the musical chimes set out like a piano key. For the chimes, the goal was to allow children to play a tune together by standing at different parts of the ‘piano.’ This was a little difficult because the garden is set in a public park, so the mallets had to be tethered so they didn’t wander off. This limited how far one could reach, so we had to provide more mallets and holders than originally intended. Fortunately,

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the garden also runs active educational programs in this area, and staff provide additional mallets on hand while simultaneously using the chimes to provide a lesson. That's really been critical to making the chimes a success."

Jessie Wingar, Children's Garden Educator for Florida Botanical Gardens, says, "Music is all around us and especially in nature. Children love music, and it encourages exploration. Also, due to the size of the chimes, these are instruments that community members may not see all the time. It also provides an opportunity to add another art element to the garden; they're almost like a sculpture!"

Noise was not much of a concern since the children's garden was designed to be its own section of the botanical garden. Lots of activity and noise were the goals. McMahon says, "We were concerned about the instruments sounding discordant, as there could be too many notes played all at once from different instruments. We spread out the instruments to help, but we also had only two types of instruments. The Cajons as a percussion instrument work well with any instrument. With the chimes, we were able to pick out the notes so that whatever was played would always be in the same key."

The construction manager of the project, Keith Hartsfield, enjoyed working on the Majeed Discovery Garden. He says, "Normally, I build buildings, and there are some really neat children's playground activity areas around, but this is all custom-built. Along with the music garden and the honeycomb climbers, it's a unique space."

Playing In Harmony

While the design and build of the Majeed Discovery Garden were not without challenges, in the end the space became exactly what was envisioned. The costs were first planned out before the global pandemic, but with that came construction delays, cost increases, and, in turn, a change in the fundraising approach. With supply-chain difficulties, certain plants became more difficult to find, and landscapers had to travel farther to pick them up. Certain features had to be removed from the scope of work, such as a beetle-shaped climbing structure. However, this allowed for the purchase of Imagination Playground Blocks, which have become one of the most popular sections of the garden.



After a grand opening last year, the garden is now being enjoyed by a range of visitors—not only children. The Children’s Garden Facilitator regularly uses the space to host school field trips. By reimagining the space and making it more inclusive, the children’s play area complements the more traditional aspects of the garden, such as the education components. Education and research are reflected in the children’s outdoor classroom, and the Music Forest introduces music-making. Some children who participate might engage in the start of their musical education by beating drums and creating melodies on the chimes. The Music Forest is one of the many spontaneous learning opportunities located in the play area that connects children to nature.

There is hope from the Florida Botanical Gardens Foundation that the design of the play area will help grow children’s interest in plants and wildlife. At the gardens, play is being utilized as a gateway to learning—many of the children won’t realize they are learning as they stage music performances and jam with their friends on the drums and chimes. Through the reimagining of the gardens, music and play provide children with the opportunity to discover nature, hopefully giving them a lifelong love of the natural world. **PRB+**

***Jody Ashfield** is the CEO and co-founder of Percussion Play, the world-leading manufacturer of outdoor musical and percussion instruments. The company is committed to making musical expression accessible to everyone, everywhere.*

