



THE "YES" GARDENS



Welcome to a site that encourages children to touch, climb, and explore—even the statues

**BY CHARLOTTE TONSOR
AND MILTON HIME**

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Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center opened in 1995 (as the National Wildflower Research Center) on a 42-acre site on the southwestern outskirts of Austin, Texas. As the state's arboretum and botanical garden, its mission is to study, protect, and promote native plants. To that end, in 2006, the center teamed with the University of Texas at Austin to solidify its footing. From the outset, the facility—with its award-winning architecture that emphasizes regional vernacular and sustainable practices—was an enchanting and delightful place to visit and stroll through the gardens. It often hosted weddings, photo shoots, and other events. And while there were planned activities for kids, the gardens themselves included no family-friendly activity areas and were more appreciated by gardeners than grandkids.

Thus began the planning for the Luci and Ian Family Garden as a place specifically designed for kids to interact with the natural world and Texas' native plants, while honoring the center's core mission of stewardship, research, and education. The team of landscape architects—W. Gary Smith, landscape architecture firm TBG Partners, and Studio8 Architects—set out to create a new, family-oriented destination that will showcase nature through a child's perspective, and be as environmentally conscious as possible.

The 4.5-acre site for the family gardens was selected as one of 150 pilot projects around the world for the Sustainable Sites Initiative (now known as SITES), a comprehensive rating and certification system for distinguishing sustainable landscapes based on measuring their performance. W. Gary Smith Design of Austin created the design for the children's garden, with landscape architect and project manager Charlotte Tonsor with TBG Partners conceiving and integrating many of the project's features and technologies. Milton Hime and the Studio8 team developed the restroom and pavilion building—the main architectural element of the site—in consultation with Overland Partners, that designed the center's original buildings. The wildflower center's experts chose and designed the native plantings.



COME ON IN

 Since the pavilion was to be the first building added away from the main-building cluster and central gardens, the Wildflower Center and Rick Archer of Overland envisioned a low-profile building that evokes a historic agricultural character—essentially a rural outbuilding. Gary Smith and the TBG team carefully sited the building to catch prevailing breezes and provide protection from the sun. Hime’s design draws heavily from the geometries of Texas pioneer architecture and is complemented by the restroom building, which also follows the outbuilding vernacular with a nod to the historic pump houses that drew water from rivers and ponds for irrigation. As the central gathering spot, the pavilion hosts a steady stream of children’s birthday parties and provides shady respite for retreating grandpar-

ents. Integrated concrete steps do double-duty as staging and seating. The pavilion’s cool, sheltered vantage point looks out onto the gardens and play elements, which are laid out along looping paths that return to a small central plaza. This notion of interconnected, circular systems infuses both the interactive play amenities and the garden’s layout, inspired by the cycles of nature. The set-up also allows kids to run freely without getting lost or going beyond the reach of their caretakers. Letting kids be free in the park was paramount. Too often, enticing statues and structures come with “No Climbing” or “No Touching” admonitions that take all the fun out of the place for the 5-and-under set. That’s where the notion of the “yes garden,” a name coined by Smith, originated.

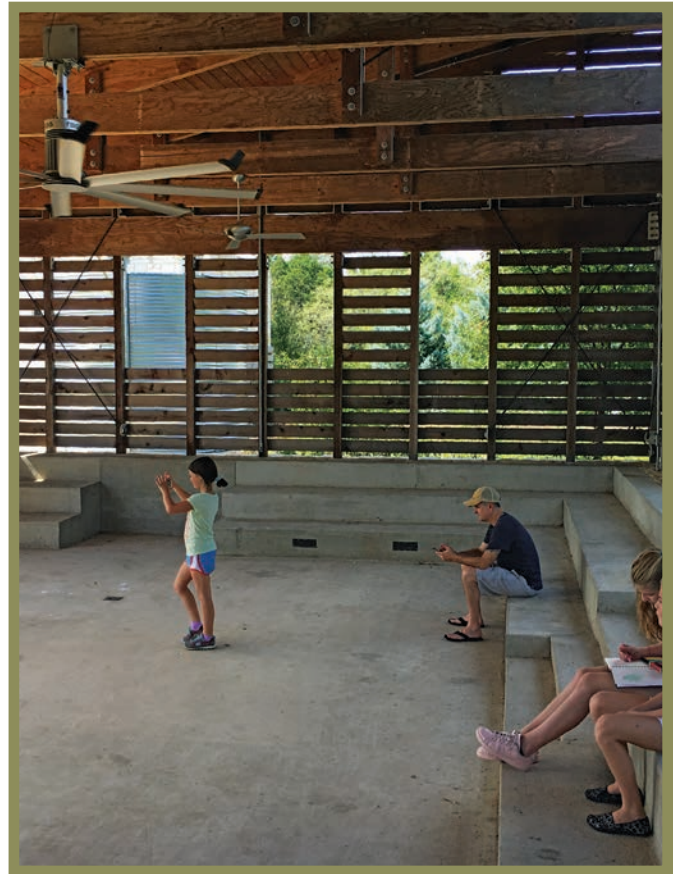
DETAILS THAT INSPIRE EXPLORATION



entral to the garden's attractions is a water-play element that involves a stream with a water pump, where kids can fill and empty buckets using a hand-pump and follow the element as it flows through the holes in the rocks, demonstrating the erosive power of water. The Wildflower Center's vision for the babbling brook was as a home for plants and fish, but, of course, children would also want to play in it. This meant the water feature had to be classified as a "special aquatic activity device," requiring the water-quality standards of a swimming pool and the accompanying chemicals. The team landed on a UV filtration system to clean the water without chemicals, while sustaining the fish and plant life.

Whimsical details, like a pair of tiny bronze frogs perched on the edge of the stream, dinosaur "tracks" in the flagstones, and walls of the man-made grotto adorned with cave paintings, provide moments that delight kids of varying ages. These elements are man-made, but the team worked to create natural and regionally appropriate rock formations, as well as designing for play and exploration.

Other nature-play elements are built from natural elements found on the site—no outside equipment is used. A grouping of tree stumps encourages climbing, hanging, jumping, and hiding, as well as exploring the natural growth of fungi and the wildlife they harbor. Giant "bird nests" are



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built from branches and vines found in the region, and kids are encouraged to build with sticks and other materials laid out for them. To support the health of the ecosystem, the landscaping is not manicured, but incorporates decaying and dying material to maintain the natural balance and further reinforce the role of natural cycles. Warnings of rattlesnakes peacefully co-existing in foliage along the paved walks serve as a gentle but firm reminder that nature should be treated with respect.

SUSTAINABLY SPEAKING

The garden's location on a healthy greenfield site in a suburban context, rather than on a damaged, industrial brownfield site, meant that many of the SITES evaluation criteria that involved rehabilitation did not apply to this project. As a result, the team tested many ideas as the project progressed, and helped inform and adapt SITE's points system to reflect this type of development, which will become more common as cities expand into surrounding natural lands. Many sustainable features were implemented during construction and behind the scenes. Given the delicate, undeveloped ecosystem, one major challenge included a soils-management plan that minimized soil compaction and limited construction routes to and from the site. This effort was a major part of earning the university's trust in the design team's intent to respect and remain

committed to the center's core mission. The rainwater cistern that gathers water for irrigation is the most visible and recognizable eco-conscious element, but significantly, the team considered the sourcing of materials in its sustainability plan. This included eliminating all non-recyclable PVC pipes (except one, integrated with the pump system) with HDPE pipes, which are more sustainably produced and eliminate noxious off gassing. Throughout the process, evaluating multiple ideas with each element to gauge which would benefit the project the most for the sustainable design created a learning and testing process that will have far-reaching benefits.



The garden has lent a fun vibe to the center and introduced a new demographic—young families in search of safe outdoor adventure—to its wonders. The cycles and seasons of native plantings and wildlife sightings mean the gardens are always changing, and the soothing effects of nature and water give people many reasons for returning. And, with the children’s area tucked away from the research gardens, the working part of the center remains the quiet and studious space reflective of its mission. But this has unquestionably raised the center’s community visibility and spawned fun, creative events such as Fortlandia, a wildly successful, annual installation of custom-built forts designed by local architects, artists, and designers. The success of the original temporary forts spilled over into installations by the Austin Parks and Recreation Department and the Trail Foundation, the non-profit that manages the city’s famed riverfront hike and bike trail where Tonsor is now capital projects director. The city has also introduced its own nature-play elements into several municipal parks, giving more kids the chance to dig, build, and climb in nature, even inside the city limits. **PRB**

Charlotte Tonsor, PLA, LEED AP is now capital projects director for the Trail Foundation. **Milton Hime**, FAIA, is founder and principal of Studio8 Architects. Both live and work in Austin, Texas.

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