

Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden Richmond, VA

Love is a word heard often at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden (LGBG), the second-most visited paid attraction in the greater Richmond, Virginia area. Visitors—nearly 300,000 in 2010—love wandering the landscaped gardens, taking photographs, enjoying familiar plants, discovering new plants, sharing family time, and learning something new. Staff members thought they would see attendance drop in the difficult economy of the past two years. Instead general day admissions increased by more than 45 percent. “Our visitors tell us they need a refreshing, peaceful environment to reduce the stress of both hard economic times and their busy lives,” says President and CEO Frank Robinson.

Established in 1984, LGBG encompasses some 60 acres of landscaped gardens, a children’s garden, visitor’s center, greenhouses, an education and library complex, and a glass-domed conservatory. Visitors of all ages enjoy access to a wide variety of educational resources in these living classrooms. In 2010 more than 2,000 adults enrolled in continuing education classes, workshops, and seminars. LGBG offers classes in home gardening, landscape design, botanical art, and nature photography. In addition, the facility has hosted symposia addressing climate change, early childhood nature education, urban gardening, and sustainable landscape design. “We are seeing heightened interest in the area of sustainable landscapes. Citizens are becoming more aware that individual decisions, such as water usage and putting chemicals on lawns and plants, affect us all,” says Robinson.

LGBG believes that working with living plants gives children a fun and interesting way to learn about science and math. Younger children make those learning connections through activities that tie into and enhance what they are learning in school. Older children complete youth service learning requirements and also serve as volunteers in the Children’s Garden. This program gives young people an opportunity to develop a strong work ethic, gain practical work experience, and explore careers related to the horticultural field. LGBG staff members maintain close relationships with the school systems and early childhood learning centers in Richmond and surrounding counties. Educators participate in professional development programs offered by LGBG in partnership with Virginia Commonwealth University’s Center for Life Sciences Education, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and the Departments of Game and Inland Fisheries and Forestry.

An active community partner, LGBG pools unused corporate benefits to open the gardens to visitors who, because of their economic circumstances, would not otherwise be able to come. Two free programs, a group program for children and *Sharing the Garden*, enable underserved and at-risk populations to visit and enjoy the gardens for free. Each year, to celebrate July 4th, LGBG suspends admission charges and invites the entire community in to celebrate.

These beautiful gardens and thoughtful programs clearly feed mind and soul, but LGBG also feeds the hungry through its Community Kitchen Garden. Volunteers help plant, cultivate, harvest, and deliver some 9,000 pounds of fresh nutritious food to FeedMore, an umbrella organization encompassing the Central Virginia Food Bank, Meals on Wheels, and the Community Kitchen. FeedMore President Fay Lohr says that LGBG provides common ground for a community that cares for the well-being of all its citizens. Many of the volunteers in the program are young people who gain a new appreciation for how food gets from the garden to the table as well as a better understanding of the challenges faced in feeding the hungry.

LGBG also provides common ground for broader regional efforts focused on urban greening. Robinson cites LGBG’s partnership with Henrico County, which funded the first phase of a comprehensive water management plan, an exciting and innovative program aimed at conserving and purifying water flowing through the gardens to the Chesapeake Bay. The plan includes low-tech sustainable and regenerative design. The water management system will boost infiltration to local water tables, clean on-site water via natural biological systems, and reduce pollutant sources. “We see this as an opportunity to raise awareness that the Chesapeake Bay begins right here,” says Robinson. “Our program will be a powerful resource for educational programming.” LGBG is working now to incorporate best water management practices, an effort Robinson concedes is challenging, especially when those practices clash with established local building codes or familiar landscaping models. As water resources become increasingly threatened, however, he feels it’s a challenge well worth taking on.

Address

Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden
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Web site: www.lewisginter.org
Phone: 804-262-9887
Annual Budget: \$5.2 million
Full-time Staff: 48
Part-time Staff: 30
President and CEO: Frank Robinson

Community Partners

CenterStage Performing Arts Center, Central Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association, City of Richmond, FeedMore (Central Virginia FoodBank & Meals on Wheels), Flora of Virginia Project, Henrico County, Hollywood Cemetery, J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, Massey Cancer Center, Monroe Park Advisory Council, Prevent Child Abuse Virginia, Richmond Audubon Society, Richmond Public Schools Garden Task Force, Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, Richmond SPCA, Tricycle Gardens, University of Richmond, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Society of Landscape Designers.



Left: Planting in the Community Kitchen Garden.
Center: Guests visit the garden on the Fourth of July free day.
Right: Children enjoy the accessible tree house in the Children's Garden.