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An Expanded Approach to 'Garden Etiquette' at Morris Arboretum

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An Expanded Approach to ‘Garden Etiquette’ at Morris Arboretum

Abstract

Arboreta and public gardens across the country have been welcoming a growing and changing audience in recent years. Morris Arboretum is no exception to this trend. The Arboretum has experienced noticeable growth in the past five years, including more than a 50% increase in new membership and similarly noticeable increases in overall visitorship. The Arboretum has seen that with this success also comes increased visitor impact. Perhaps most noticeable have been incidences that damage plants in the living collection, statues, and garden facilities. The purpose of this project is to better understand the cause of the problem, and discuss possible solutions for the Arboretum. Visitor surveys, stakeholder interviews, interviews with staff from similar institutions, and a space use analysis of the public garden side of Morris Arboretum will help answer some of these questions. The project will culminate in a strategic plan dedicated to addressing and improving visitor impact, with a focus on creating a culture of respect.

Disciplines

Horticulture

Comments

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AUTHOR: Claire Sundquist
McLean Contributionship Endowed Education Intern

DATE: March 31, 2015

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Scope

Morris Arboretum has experienced noticeable growth in the past five years, including more than a 50% increase in new membership and similarly noticeable increases in overall visitorship. Unfortunately, they have also learned that with success comes increased visitor impact.

The purpose of this project is to better understand the cause of damaging visitor behavior and discuss possible solutions for the Arboretum, culminating in a strategic plan dedicated to improving garden etiquette and minimizing visitor impact at Morris Arboretum.

The plan focuses on day-to-day visitors on the public side of the Arboretum. It will not provide specific strategies for events, weddings, or other programming. Additionally, the Bloomfield Farm portion of the Arboretum is excluded from the plan as it is used primarily by staff, and is only visited by the public during special events or when guided by trained staff and volunteers.

METHODS

Stakeholder and Institution Interviews

Stakeholder interviews, and interviews with staff from similar institutions helped to identify what strategies have been used elsewhere, what has been successful, and whether these approaches would be appropriate at Morris Arboretum. Interviews included representatives from Longwood Gardens, Chanticleer, The Barnes Foundation Arboretum, Tyler Arboretum, Shofuso Japanese House and Garden, Phipps Conservatory, The Franklin Institute, The Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College, Smithsonian Gardens, The United States National Arboretum, Friends of the High Line, Mt. Cuba Center, The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, Missouri Botanical Garden, and Brooklyn Botanic Garden. These interviews provided a wealth of information on implementing strategies. It is also important to note, however, that a wide majority of representatives from arboreta and public gardens expressed that their institution also frequently struggles with visitor impact and described hodgepodge garden etiquette strategies that were often created on an as needed basis. Visitor impact mitigation is clearly an issue that requires further attention among arboreta and public gardens across the country.

Visitor Survey

In order to better understand visitor perception of the Arboretum, a survey was designed and given at random to 128 visitors over a period of 6 weeks in the fall of 2014. The work of Welte (2011) at the Washington Park Arboretum, as well as work done at Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College (Kelley et al., 2010), were particularly helpful in designing this survey.

Although the survey gathered information on a number of topics, the main purpose was to determine whether visitor expectations of the Arboretum align with the institution's self-image.

The survey began with a short introduction followed by a series of six verbal questions. Participants were then handed the page and asked to fill in a number of voluntary demographic questions. Possible answers for the verbal portion of the survey were divided into categories, unique to that question. These categories were used to analyze the responses given by participants. Due to the free response nature of the survey many answers fit into more than one category. Thus, categories are not mutually exclusive.

Differences between institutional identity and public awareness of the Arboretum's mission were highlighted in the analysis of the survey. When the participants were asked where they might have gone for a similar experience if the Arboretum had not been an option, 43% mentioned a children's park or natural area, while only 33% mentioned another arboretum or public garden. Similarly, when asked to define the purpose of an arboretum, 'conservation and/or preservation' was the most common answer at 34%. Meanwhile, only 10% of responses mentioned horticultural display, 5% mentioned research, 4% discussed community building or outreach, and 24% mentioned education. With education, research, outreach, and horticultural display listed in Morris Arboretum's mission as the "four major activities" conducted by the Arboretum, these visitor perceptions certainly do not align with the Arboretum's institutional identity.

STRATEGIC PLAN

Mixed Methods Approach

Analyzing the answers from the visitor survey data highlighted an important gap between how Morris Arboretum views itself as an institution and how visitors perceive what the Arboretum does. These findings suggested the need for more than simply informing visitors of Morris Arboretum's garden etiquette rules and prompted a shift in the focus of this project. Cultivating a culture of institutional awareness and respect among staff and visitors became an important piece.

For this reason, this strategic plan utilizes a mixed methods approach to visitor impact mitigation. Each suggested piece of the plan aims to either realign visitor expectations by improving awareness of Morris Arboretum's mission and institutional identity, or to improve knowledge of the Arboretum's specific etiquette rules and policies.

Policy Clarification

When speaking with staff members across the Arboretum it became clear that interpretations of the Arboretum's policies for appropriate visitor behavior varied greatly. In addition, of the policies that everyone was aware of, there were still a lot of questions and uncertainty due to vague wording and the flexible nature of enforcing the policies. Policy

clarification and documentation should be considered a top priority for the institution to be sure that every staff member is on the same page, and to ensure that every visitor can enjoy an equitable experience.

Online Representation

Today's visitors to gardens, museums, and other cultural institutions are increasingly likely to check online resources before visiting. As more and more Millennials join the ranks of Arboretum visitors and members, an institution's online representation is becoming more and more important. The visitor survey data suggests this is true at Morris Arboretum, with the largest group of people (36%) responding that they had visited an online resource managed by Morris Arboretum (website, blog, or social media platform) to prepare for their visit.

This tendency puts the Arboretum's online presence in an important position. Before ever engaging with the garden in person most visitors have already gained a number of expectations, based purely on how the garden is represented online. It is important that this online presence clearly reflect the mission and institutional image.

In the past, Morris Arboretum's online communication with visitors was largely revenue driven. A considerable portion of the Arboretum's social media content in 2014 (49%) was aimed at advertising programs or special events and exhibits. Just as notable in 2014 is what topics were not represented. Out of more than 1,000 posts published throughout the year there was only one mention of research. Similarly, there was only one mention of the botany department, no mention of the urban forestry department, and no discussions of specific work done by staff in these departments.

However, 2015 has brought about many changes to the Arboretum's social media strategies. Morris Arboretum recently hired ChatterBlast, an online strategy and social media marketing company, to review the Arboretum's current use of social media, and to suggest a strategy for improvement. The strategy included useful logistical suggestions for implementing future social media goals. In only a few months the Arboretum's social media content has not only increased but has also become more diversified.

As consultants, ChatterBlast was inherently providing an outsider's perspective and thus their plan primarily encompasses suggestions for the logistics of content creation. In order to make this plan as effective as possible it will be important to fortify it with a focus in specific subject matter for content creation.

Going forward, overall content goals should focus on highlighting underrepresented departments and unique Morris Arboretum activities. While content featuring revenue building events and activities should remain, they should function only as one portion of what is depicted. Mission driven content, highlighting behind-the-scenes looks at the Arboretum, can work to increase awareness among visitors. Topics that should be highlighted on a regular basis include the following:

1. Current and recent research
2. Urban Forestry Department Outreach efforts: *The urban forestry department conducts a large amount of work in the community. This can be highlighted not only to increase the awareness of the existence of the urban forestry department, but also of the Arboretum's outreach work, an important mission goal.*
3. 'Behind the Scenes' horticultural work: *The beauty of the Arboretum's landscape has been well described in past social media content. Showing the work it takes to create such a luxurious landscape will help motivate visitors to want to protect the views they enjoy.*
4. Volunteer efforts: *Volunteers are an integral part of the work done across departments at Morris Arboretum. Highlighting their work, interests, and stories will further increase awareness of the time and effort it takes to construct the Arboretum experience.*
5. Underrepresented departments: *Work done in the botany and urban forestry departments have been particularly overlooked in the past.*

Staff and Volunteer Training

The single most suggested visitor impact strategy mentioned when interviewing arboreta and public garden representatives was to physically have people in the garden to monitor visitor behavior and suggest alternatives. Of course this suggestion comes with its own set of limitations. Approaching a visitor can potentially be off putting. After all, when a staff member sees someone picking flowers from the rose garden or swinging from Katsura branches the immediate response that comes to mind might be a harsh "Stop that!" If staff and volunteers were appropriately trained to approach visitors with a kind 'correct and redirect' approach the interaction could move from severe to informative.

Funding would be the second concern. Hiring enough paid staff to be in the garden, devoted to visitor experience and impact mitigation, is a high cost option. Enlisting volunteers is an often suggested solution to this problem. However, the Arboretum currently does not train any group of volunteers to perform in such a capacity. While volunteer guides do receive some visitor services training, it is largely assumed that they will be guiding tours of adults, or of school children accompanied by teachers and/or parents. In these situations their priority is education. Training volunteers to perform as behavior monitors in the Arboretum would require a new set of training workshops to be designed and implemented.

In order to spread the weight of the need for visitor interaction, the Arboretum should train all staff to properly interact with visitors. The majority of Arboretum employees in the garden during open hours are, in fact, not visitor services employees. Instead, horticulturists, arborists, facilities staff, and interns witness the bulk of undesirable visitor actions. Training all staff members could provide those people who are most likely to witness problem behavior with the abilities and confidence to properly handle the situation.

One option for easing the training burden on the visitor services department is to send several Arboretum representatives to Longwood Garden's *Guest Experience Academy*. In addition, the Guest Experience Academy welcomes people from a variety of positions; encouraging people working outside of visitor services departments to participate. Most importantly, the program asks participants to consider the mission and values of the arboretum or garden at which they are employed and encourages them to consider how each idea might be modified to suit the specific needs of that institution. At \$475 per person, this workshop would not be cost effective for sending large numbers of Arboretum staff. However, sending select representatives from each Arboretum department to the workshop would provide the tools needed to train additional staff upon their return.

In order to better utilize existing volunteer groups similar training sessions should also be provided to volunteers at new guide training, the annual February horticulture volunteer workshops, and in the form of refresher workshops, that occur throughout the year. These training sessions will provide volunteers with the tools to appropriately address visitors when possible and if the volunteer feels comfortable doing so. Providing staff and volunteers with the skills and confidence to approach visitors will greatly increase visitor interaction and will create opportunities for education and awareness building.

Providing Active Alternatives through Educational Programming

At Morris Arboretum, 59% percent of visitors surveyed had children with them in their group. Similarly, 52% of respondents mentioned youth centered activities as their motivation for visiting. These responses included options such as bringing their child to a children's concert, challenging them with a scavenger hunt, or simply getting the child outside. Many of these respondents described the need to give their children a chance to burn off energy, citing the Arboretum as a safe place to allow their children to "run free". These survey results are not surprising. Strollers are a common sight in the Arboretum, as are parents with toddlers and older children.

Parents who once depended on the Arboretum to function as a park will continue to require that the Arboretum fill the same role, even as they become aware of the distinctions between a park and an arboretum. In order to maintain visitor levels while mitigating impact it is important to provide these families with appropriate alternatives for keeping their children active and stimulated. In addition, these alternatives will act as an important tool for staff when confronting a parent whose child is behaving in an undesirable way. By providing an explanation as well as redirecting the group to a new and appropriate activity the situation can be resolved while avoiding negativity.

For the everyday visiting family one goal should be to have a variety of self-guided educational opportunities. This collection should include options for a range of ages and time commitments. In addition, the activities should aim to increase the whole family's awareness of the Arboretum's mission and institutional values. The Arboretum already has a few options for families, including a scavenger hunt, the Tree Adventure Passport, seasonal Family Fun Cards, and two kid-focused, self-guided tours. These provide a great base for continued development of

educational opportunities. To fill gaps, newly developed options should aim to do one or more of the following:

1. *Engage children who visit Morris Arboretum regularly*
2. *Engage children above the age of 10*
3. *Engage children in physical activity appropriate for a public garden setting*

One option that would fulfill all of these requirements is to develop a program modeled on Junior Ranger Programs featured at National Parks across the country. Although the design of these programs varies from park to park, the research suggests that the programs have a positive effect on visitor attitudes regarding the park as well as environmental issues. (Stern, M., Powell, R., & Cook, C., 2011)

A similar program at the Arboretum could provide families an opportunity to engage their children on multiple visits. In addition, the activities could be designed to highlight specific concerns in the garden, and ways the child can help to protect the plants in the Arboretum.

Providing Active Alternatives through Physical Additions

Self-guided educational programs, as described above, are great opportunities for families to learn about the Arboretum, plants, and the environment, but what about the parent who brings their child to the Arboretum for a break? The mom or dad that comes to the Arboretum in hopes of running the kids ragged, with minimal effort on their part, might not be willing to lead their children through a self-guided tour or program. These visitors are looking for kid friendly features of the garden where their children can engage in self-directed play.

A majority of gardens and arboreta interviewed pointed to kid-focused features as opportunities for redirection. The kid-focused features mentioned in interviews varied from tree houses to children's gardens and playscapes. Regardless of the type of feature discussed, all were considered important assets to mitigating visitor impact in other parts of the garden as well as useful educational tools.

Since 2010 Morris Arboretum has featured a canopy walk called "Out on a Limb" (OoaL) where visitors can "get a bird's eye view" of the forest. In addition to experiencing trees from a different angle visitors are able to climb on the hammock-like Squirrel Scramble, check out a giant bird's nest with oversized robin's eggs, listen to the sounds of the forest with ear trumpets, and take a closer look at the forest with binoculars.

While Out on a Limb has been extremely popular, and provides families a location in the garden to allow children the freedom to explore without concern for trampling plants, there are limitations. Most noticeable is the fact that the bird's nest, ear trumpets, and other activities on the canopy walk are most appropriate for toddlers and preschool aged children. Older children are more likely to engage with OoaL quickly, moving on to other portions of the Arboretum

before they use up much energy. In addition, the most physically engaging feature of OoaL, the Squirrel Scramble, can get very crowded on busy days, inherently limiting usage. The addition of a second child-focused feature of the garden, particularly one designed for school aged children, could help ease the burden on OoaL as well as provide an active and physically engaging sanctuary.

Signage and Physical Reminders

While signs and other physical reminders in the garden should not be the main method for increasing visitor awareness, they do play an important role in informing visitors of the basic expectations for behavior in the garden. To this purpose, Morris Arboretum currently has a number of small signs throughout the garden. These signs are multi-purpose and moveable depending on need. A space-use analysis of visitor paths in the garden will help focus use of these signs at locations of high visibility.

In addition to these small signs, a larger sign can be found at the entrance kiosk that outlines all of the garden etiquette policies for the Arboretum (see Appendix B). Unfortunately, this sign is unlikely to be seen due to placement on the side of the kiosk, below eye level. To exacerbate the issue, visitors are most often greeted by visitor services staff at their cars before even reaching the kiosk for a chance to view the sign. By moving the sign to become a free standing sign in front of the kiosk, visitors will be more likely to see the sign upon entrance.

An additional larger sign with a similar outline of expectations should also be posted on a walking path near the Widener Visitor Center. This sign will improve awareness among visitors that arrived by bus, for members who are less likely to pause for long periods at the entrance kiosk, and will give a second chance for viewing by visitors who did not notice the sign at the entrance kiosk.

In addition to signs in the garden, strategic plantings can deter visitors from utilizing certain areas, especially where fencing is not an ideal option. Such plantings could be particularly useful under the Sugarman Sculptures, to deter climbing. Between trees of the Oak Allée is also a good area for strategic plantings, as visitors tend to cut between the trees, compacting the soil. Strategic planting has been found to be a successful strategy by some of the public gardens interviewed, but has had mixed results at others.

Finally, additional signs should be designed for seasonal changes that explain the necessity of any closure or alteration. The trail that leads to the wetland area, which has had increased attention and use in recent years, is one example of this. Closure due to ice, snow, or muddy trails is a necessity for trail maintenance and visitor safety purposes. During closures the ‘Trail Closed’ sign should not only be clearly visible, but should also succinctly explain the visitor that reasons for closure.

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Appendix A: Visitor Survey



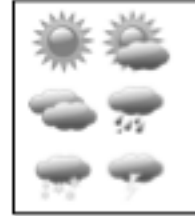
Visitor Information

These questions will help us better understand our audience. The information given will be kept strictly confidential.
All questions are voluntary. Thank you for your time!

1. Circle your **sex**: Male / Female
2. Mark your **age**: 18-19 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69 70+
3. Are you a Morris Arboretum member?
Yes No
4. Are you a college or university student?
Yes No
If so, where? _____
5. How often do you visit the Morris Arboretum?
This is my first time.
1-5 times a year
5-10 times a year
Once a month
Many times a month
6. How often do you visit other arboreta or public gardens in a year?
never
1-5 times a year
5-10 times a year
Once a month
Many times a month
7. Please indicate the number of people you came with today in each age category:
Children (0-12) _____ Teenagers(13-18) _____ Adults(19-64) _____ Seniors (65+) _____

Survey #: _____

9414 Meadowbrook Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19118 • Phone (215)247-5777 • Fax (215)248-4439



1. What brings you to Morris Arboretum today? (add follow up with: 'what do you plan to do here today?')

2. Did you do anything to prepare for your visit today?

- Visit the Morris Arboretum website
- Read the Morris Arboretum blog
- Visited the Morris Arboretum Facebook page
- Printed a brochure or map from the website
- Read about other arboreta or public gardens
- Talked to friends and family
- Called the Arboretum
- Other →

Other:

3. Where else might you have gone for a similar experience?

4. In your opinion, what are the most common reasons people visit an arboretum?

5. How would you describe an arboretum to someone who does not know what an arboretum is, or has never visited one?

6. How would you define the purpose of an arboretum?

Survey #: _____

Visitor Survey: Demographic Data

Participant Sex:

Male: 32%

Female: 68%

Participant Age:

Age group	18-19	20-19	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Percent of participants	3	8	50	11	13	12	3

Participant Membership

Members: 54%

Non-members: 46%

College or University Students

Students: 5%

Non-Students: 95%

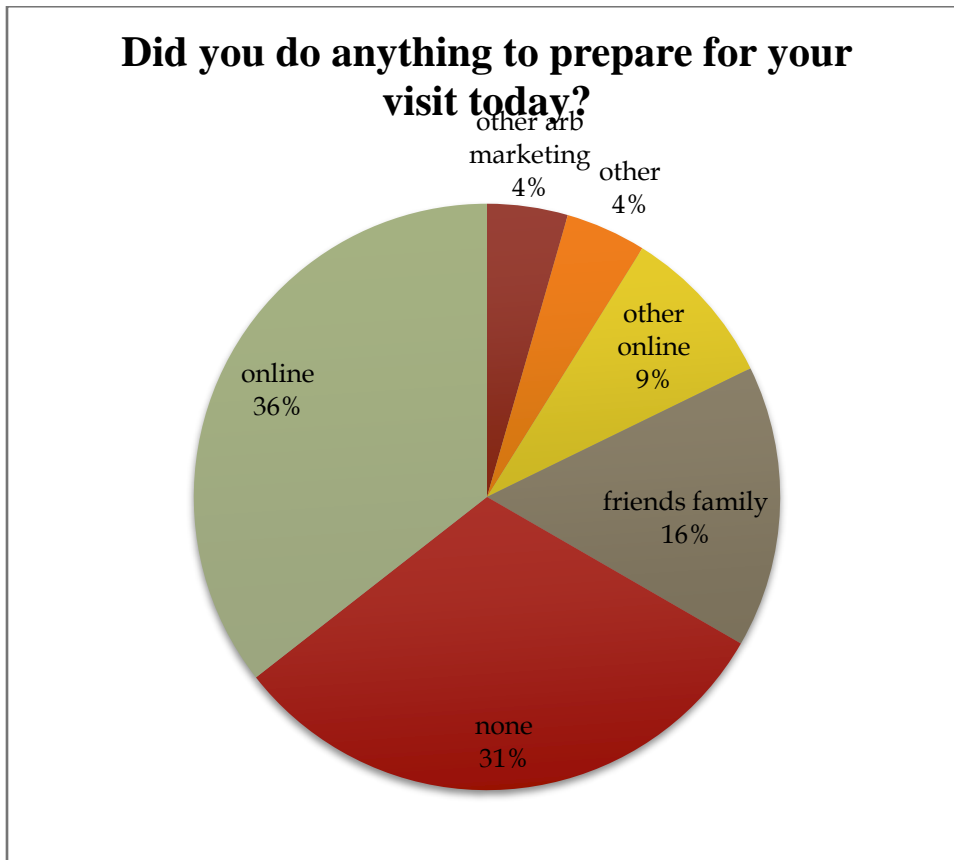
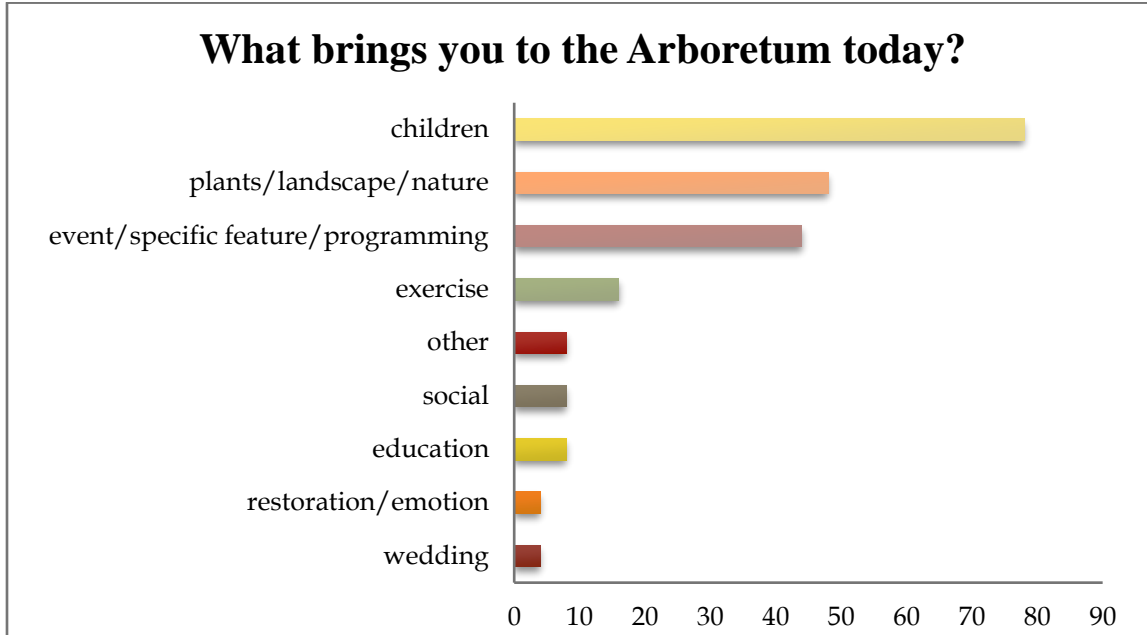
Morris Arboretum visit frequency per year

Frequency per year	This is my first time	1-5 times	5-10 times	Once a month	Many times a month
Percent of participants	32	30	14	8	16

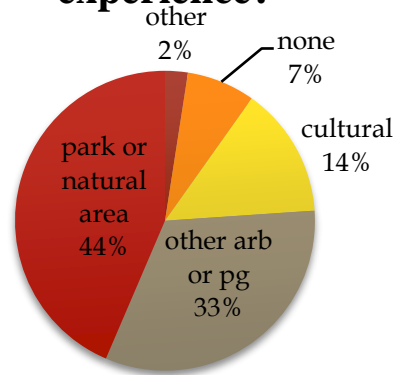
Visitation frequency at other arboreta or public gardens per year

Frequency per year	Never	1-5 times	5-10 times	Once a month	Many times a month
Percent of participants	19	59	19	0	3

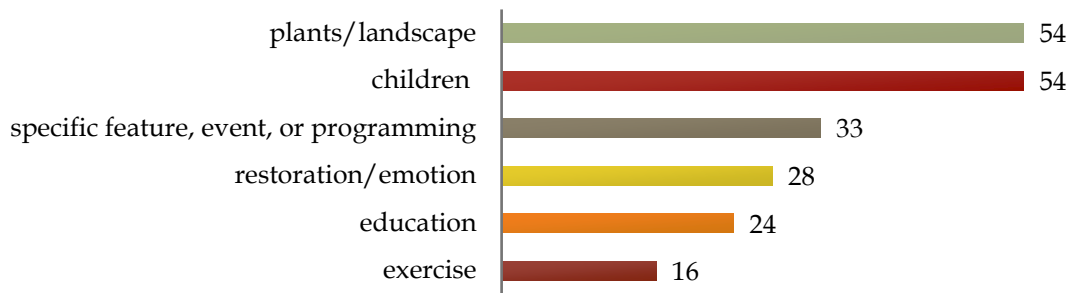
Visitor Survey: Verbal



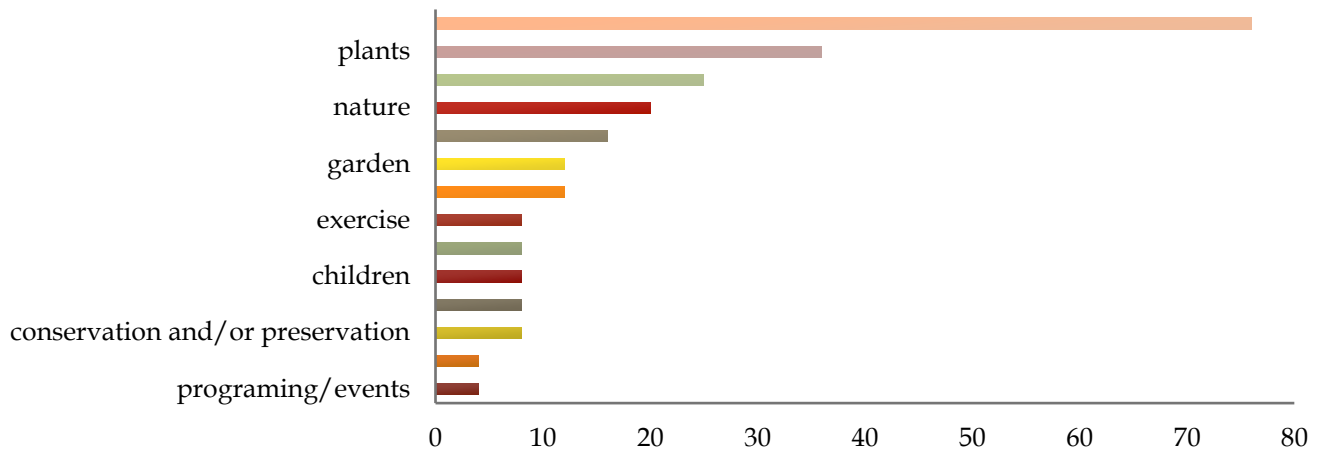
If you were unable to come to the Morris Arboretum today, where else might you have gone for a similar experience?



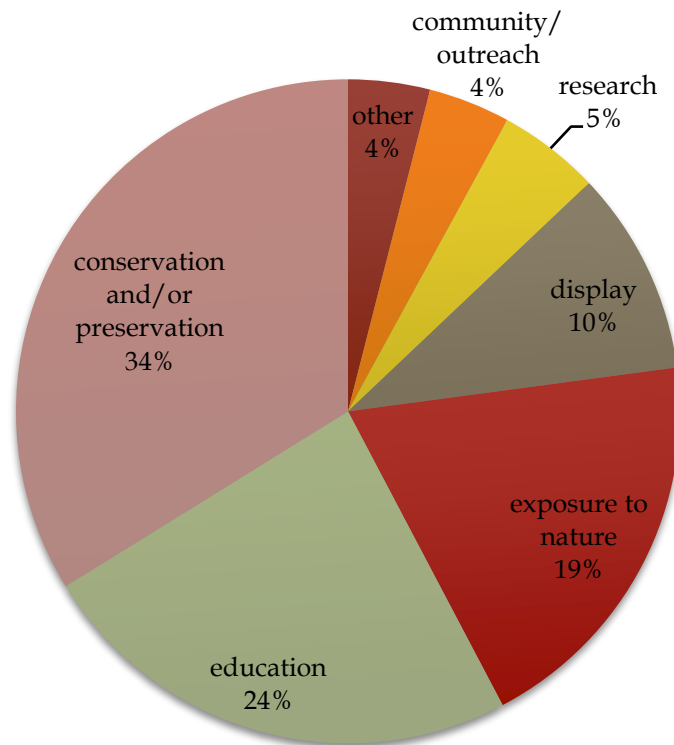
In your opinion, what are the most common reasons people visit an arboretum?



How would you describe an arboretum to someone who does not know what an arboretum is, or has never visited one?



How would you define the purpose of an arboretum?



Appendix B: Signage and Physical Reminders

Current Placement of Entrance Kiosk Sign



Suggested Location for Second Detailed Policy Sign (Woodland Walk between Widener Visitor Center and Out on a Limb)

