A Garden to Feast the Senses

The Ethnobotany Garden is located behind the Hayden Conference Center at the South Carolina Botanical Garden in Clemson, SC.
Introduction

What better way to get children interested in plants than to teach them about edible flowers, leaves used for band-aids, and roots that dye cloth pink? This is the philosophy behind The Ethnobotany Garden at the South Carolina Botanical Garden. Ethnobotany is the study of human interactions with useful plants throughout history. The ethnobotany garden is a living display of important plants that have been utilized by various cultures. There are over 50 plants housed in the garden, each with a unique set of past and present uses. Many are quite familiar to the modern-day palate: rosemary, basil, oregano, thyme, and the lesser-known edible flowers of borage and calendula. Others present their stately functions with inviting aromas such as the anise-scented leaves of winter tarragon and the healing silver dollar eucalyptus. Common, overlooked “weeds” including Queen Anne’s lace, yarrow, and mullein are celebrated in the garden, as each has been used for centuries as folk medicines. The inhabitants of the garden neither advertise their beneficial attributes nor their hidden talents… instead they invite a show-and-tell of historical and modern gifts: medicines, fibers, and dyes.

Hollyhock, one of many dye plants represented in the garden, can also be used for papermaking.
Herbs propagated by Sprouting Wings participants include: mullein, self-heal, yarrow, calendula, and oregano.

Garden Installation

The Ethnobotany Garden was designed to be an inspiring haven for children, one that will teach them about the meaningful relationships between plants and people, while invoking creativity and wonder. Originally designed as part of a larger children’s garden, the project was chosen by Plant and Environmental Science graduate student Meghan Baker as her non-thesis Master’s project. The project was awarded the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control’s “Champions of the Environment Grant” for its ability to bridge ecological stewardship with hands-on learning and student involvement. The grant funds helped acquire seeds, plant materials, and educational resources for the multi-phase service-learning project. Additional monetary support was provided by a donation from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

With tremendous support from the South Carolina Botanical Garden staff, construction began in January 2003. The SC Botanical Garden furnished machinery, building materials, plant materials, as well as installation expertise. Under the guidance of professional stonemason Gary Burgess, and longtime garden volunteer, Roger
Carpenter, Clemson horticulture students under Professor Mary Haque learned masonry and construction skills as well as valuable landscape installation techniques. Central Elementary students involved with Sprouting Wings, an after-school horticultural program operated through the botanical garden, sowed seeds for the garden. Through the cooperation of these and many more individuals, the installation phase was completed in June 2004.

Clemson Horticulture students participated in the garden through Professor Mary Haque’s Landscape Implementation course.
Educational Outreach

With the garden in place, the program development phase was initiated. Inquiry-based educational lessons on regional ethnobotany, native plant conservation, and habitat biodiversity centered on specific garden species. Activities were then created to draw out the imaginative and artistic abilities of children such as using natural dyes, making herbal teas, and leaf printing. All educational materials were designed to meet South Carolina state curriculum standards for grades 3-5. Several educational programs have already been conducted at the Ethnobotany garden site, involving Sprouting Wings participants, Clemson University undergraduates, and other interested community members.

Graduate student, Meghan Baker, teaches Sprouting Wings students about the medicinal and fiber uses of hops.
The final phase of the project involved the creation of a traveling ethnobotany trunk, which can be used by local schools, home-schooling organizations, and community groups, to share a new approach on the importance of plants to human societies. The trunk contains resources on growing and using useful plants, examples of natural dyes and other plant-based products, and a compilation of the previously mentioned educational lessons and activities. The trunk is housed at the South Carolina Botanical Garden and is currently available to interested parties. If interested in learning more about the ethnobotany trunk, or the ethnobotany garden, please contact Meghan Baker at meghanlbaker@yahoo.com.
The Ethnobotany Trunk, housed at the South Carolina Botanical Garden, is a teaching tool available to local schools, scout groups, and other interested educators.