

A vision for the Arboretum in the next decade

By Cheryl Whitaker

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Our mission to deliver research-based information to our constituency will take on new forms, with cutting-edge methods for content delivery through internet and social media.

I've been on the job as director for almost 16 months, punctuated with a couple of hurricanes, several hugely successful events, solid relationships within the community, a couple of serious personal health setbacks, and an amazing team of staff and volunteers. I love the job, and want to share some of my vision for the Arboretum and our New Hanover County center of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension for the new decade.

I envision this seven acres of grounds and buildings on Oleander Drive as a model of urban sustainability with resilient landscapes, effective stormwater management, low-waste functions and events, LEED certified construction, and gardens and facilities fully accessible and frequented by people of all races, economic backgrounds and abilities.

The gardens of the Arboretum can exhibit an increased diversity of plant material, with education about selections that provide superior ecosystem services and meet the triple bottom line of economic, social and environmental good. Enhancements throughout the gardens will attract children's interactions, playing and learning with research-based innovations.

Sustained water quality improvements for the koi pond's healthy aquatic environment and technology employed for water quality monitoring will serve as an educational tool. Methods of urban agriculture may be demonstrated on the grounds; European honeybee hives, laying hens, mushrooms logs, hydroponic and aquaponics systems in place as teaching models for local food production.

I see a new facility designed for Cooperative Extension functions with fewer walls and more technology; ample, secured storage out of sight and highly visible shared work spaces. A rooftop garden and observation deck with collectors for rainwater and sunshine will serve as models of low impact development. Perhaps we can offer a commercial kitchen for local producers to generate value-added farm products, to serve caterers for an upscale garden event venue, and to support a lunchtime cafe. A state of the art theater style auditorium, set for near perfect acoustics and visual teaching would be well used, as would extra meeting rooms and flexible space for the variety of functions we host.

The Friends of the Arboretum board fundraising focus will mature into legacy and planned giving to endow operational enhancements and support new capital improvements campaign. Events will incentivize ride-sharing, public and human powered transportation options.

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Our exemplary Consumer Horticulture and Extension Master Gardener Volunteer program will continue its sustained success educating our citizenry. Our 4-H program is poised for growth in number and diversity of clubs, volunteers and students, making great progress in developing our county's youth. Commercial Horticulture programming equips the industry with innovative methods for sustainable, resilient landscapes, and the Community Development program focuses on our important tree canopy.

The Ability Garden, now a NHC Cooperative Extension Program moves into the new decade to provide a high level of therapeutic intervention using horticulture and nature as a modality. The focus is specific health needs expressed through the greater Wilmington area, such as youth and adults with disabilities, older adults, disadvantaged youth and communities and youth with behavioral disorders. In the future this would include developing population-specific programs for autistic youth and adults, aphasia support, cancer support, survivors of domestic abuse, citizens experiencing PTSD and those recovering from substance abuse.

The proposed addition of a full-time, single county Family and Consumer Science program will bring great traction to meeting our county's strategic goals for citizen's good health. And, a new program area of Urban Agriculture and Natural Resource education may be added to round out our Extension programming.

We look forward to a great decade of serving our community; I hope you can be a part of this vision.

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