

RUTGERS GARDENS VISION PLAN

PLAN HIGHLIGHTS
OCTOBER 2025



RUTGERS-NEW BRUNSWICK
**School of Environmental
and Biological Sciences**



ETM ASSOCIATES, L.L.C.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT
PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT
PUBLIC SPACE DESIGN



FRANCINE CONWAY
*Chancellor of
Rutgers–New Brunswick*

A national horticultural landmark located on the vibrant Cook campus, Rutgers Gardens is both a living laboratory and welcoming greenspace for education, engagement, and enjoyment. Under this transformative vision plan, Rutgers Gardens will strengthen the green space network across the Rutgers University–New Brunswick campus, broadening collective impact and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the garden spaces that enrich the University experience. This strategic linkage, enabled by the SEBS Campus Stewardship initiative, enhances alignment with the Rutgers–New Brunswick Academic Master Plan. This vital reinvigoration of Rutgers Gardens will vastly increase opportunities for students, volunteers, and visitors to ground themselves in wellness and ensure ongoing development of Rutgers Gardens as a leading public garden in New Jersey and the region.



LAURA LAWSON
*School of Environmental and
Biological Sciences Executive Dean*

Rutgers Gardens is a cornerstone of our school's many and varied living laboratories, with its designed and natural landscapes providing an ideal applied educational setting for students and community to learn not only about public horticulture and sustainable agriculture, but more widely the connection between plants, human health and nutrition, wellness, and the arts. Integration with other teaching-focused gardens, farms, and greenhouses within the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences ensures that Rutgers Gardens enriches the academic experience for students within SEBS and beyond. It is a vital hub for community outreach—offering programs and events that connect the university with the broader community—thereby serving as a welcoming and informative gateway to Rutgers University–New Brunswick and Cook Campus.



LAUREN ERRICKSON
**Director of Rutgers Gardens
and Campus Stewardship**

For decades, Rutgers Gardens has been a defining element of many students' experiences within our School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. Our plant specimens, and the land itself, have been cared for by generations of students and their mentors working alongside community members, collectively lending their hands to shape Rutgers Gardens into the special place that it is today.

As we face new opportunities and challenges of the 21st century, we embrace this redefined vision to inspire and guide Rutgers Gardens forward, broadening our education and engagement in a way that is meaningful and connected. In collaboration with ETM Associates, we have outlined not only this new vision, but also an action-oriented pathway toward implementation of the plan to revitalize how people experience Rutgers Gardens.

The history of Rutgers Gardens coupled with input shared by hundreds of current university-affiliated and community-based stakeholders form the foundation of the plan, which reflects a strengthened alignment of Rutgers Gardens with all of Rutgers—New Brunswick. We hope that this new vision presents opportunities for enhanced educational experiences along with expanded partnerships, volunteerism, and philanthropic support toward helping Rutgers Gardens thrive as a welcoming space for current and future generations of students and community members.

The vision planning process quickly brought to light how deep the connections to Rutgers Gardens run amongst our university and public communities. To all who have contributed toward shaping this new vision, I offer my sincere thanks for your dedication to Rutgers Gardens. Your thoughts, perspectives, and voices will move us forward toward a bright and vibrant future. We look forward to seeing you soon!



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Rutgers Gardens Vision Plan

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank everyone who shared their time, thoughts, expertise, and passion over the course of the Vision Plan project and helped in the creation of this document.

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VISION PLAN SUMMARY

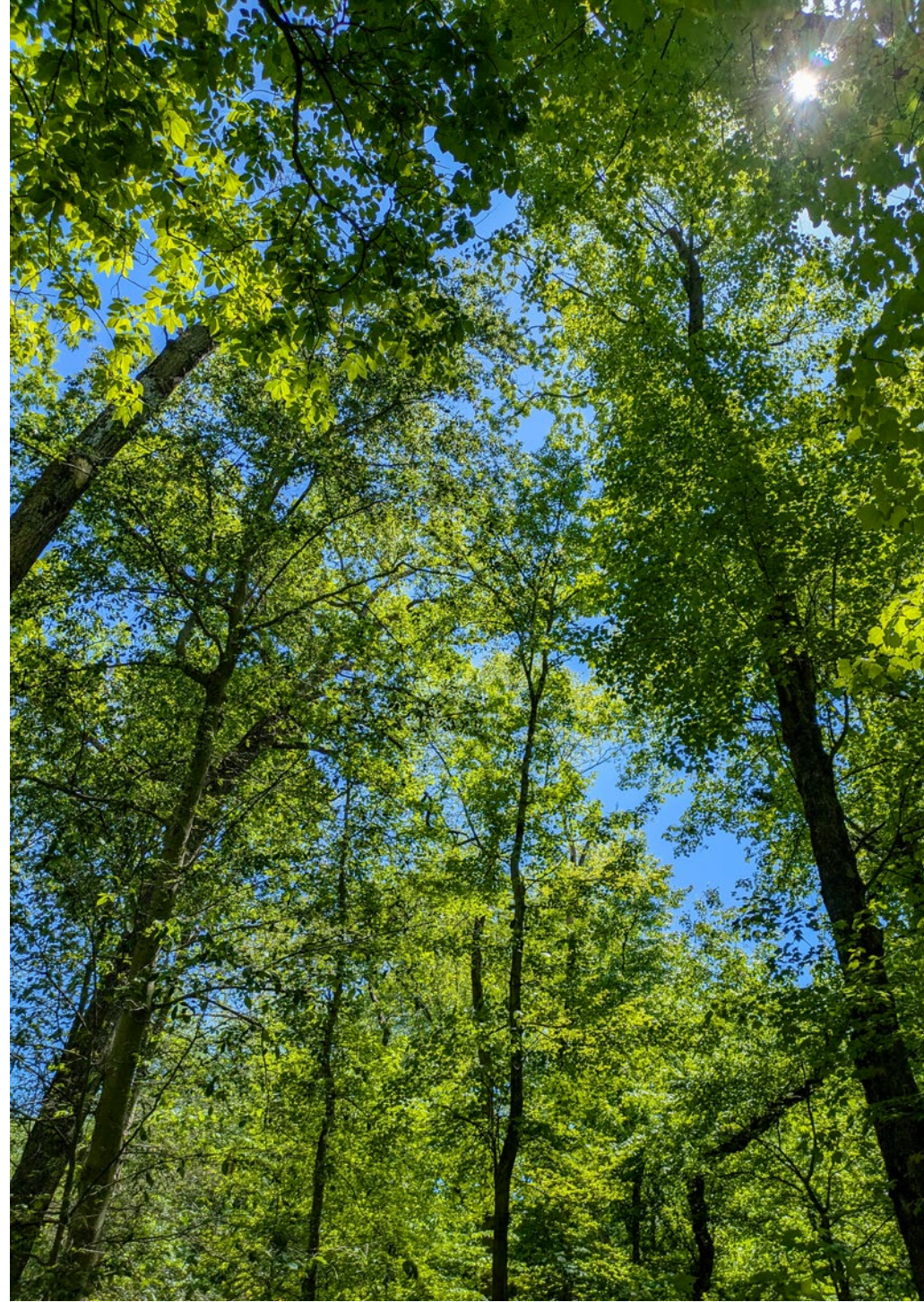


WHY A VISION PLAN?

Rutgers Gardens is the 180-acre public botanic garden of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. It is located on the G.H. Cook campus within New Brunswick and North Brunswick, New Jersey. Rutgers Gardens features display gardens, natural areas, a student vegetable farm, and university research areas. Rutgers Gardens is a “living laboratory” for both university and community learning and engagement with opportunities to expand its reach and impact.

Rutgers Gardens aspires to become a core academic resource for university students across disciplines, as well as to achieve recognition as a welcoming, educational hub for community engagement. To advance, the Gardens need fresh vision, clear direction, and an innovative yet sustainable operational plan, all developed within the context of the site itself.

Presented here is a newly developed strategic vision plan, which will position Rutgers Gardens for future long-term success, both with respect to Rutgers University and public stakeholders, as it evolves toward achieving this redefined horticultural and educational vision.



WHAT NOW? WHERE RUTGERS GARDENS IS TODAY

Context & Background

The role and landscape of Rutgers Gardens has been shaped over time by both research and public interests. During the 1910s and 1920s, the primary focus on the land that would become Rutgers Gardens was agricultural research. Since then, in parallel to increasing urbanization throughout New Jersey, the site has incorporated more elements of ornamental horticulture while transforming into a space that welcomes public visitors and learners. Research continued during this transformation, with various university-related groups conducting notable plant breeding research (some of which continues today). The intention for Rutgers Gardens to serve as an educational site for the university can similarly be traced to the past, with the 1969 Campus Master Plan proposing the site as a “Living Laboratory.”

Today, Rutgers Gardens is part of the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (SEBS) within Rutgers—New Brunswick. As such, it receives support from SEBS, and fundraising efforts are conducted through the Rutgers University Foundation. Additional support is provided through revenue-generating activities at the Gardens and via the engagement of members, volunteers, and partners.

As evidence of its significance, Rutgers Gardens was granted a Horticultural Landmark Award by the American Society for Horticultural Science in 2017.

Currently, visitors to Rutgers Gardens engage with the site primarily for learning and general enjoyment. On-site programs reflect the broad range of stakeholders, and include food production and education at the Rutgers Gardens Student Farm, a seasonal weekly farmers market, a nature-based youth 4-H Camp, university and community classes, ongoing and emerging university research, and occasional venue rentals for private events.

Research & Site Analysis

A critical part of developing the Vision Plan included gathering input and information from a variety of sources and stakeholders to best inform the future direction for Rutgers Gardens. Having multiple types of information streams provided a range of insights and analyses to expand beyond single-source or limited data input, thereby driving an expansive vision planning process.

Our research and data gathering included the following:

- » Reviewed over 20 related documents and projects
- » Analyzed 688 survey responses from multiple stakeholder groups
- » Benchmarked 22 similar and aspirational institutions
- » Conducted 37 interviews to gather input from 71 stakeholders
- » Completed an on-site assessment based on multiple site visits

Key Takeaways

There is a strong desire for Rutgers Gardens to be successful, to be increasingly recognized as an integral part of the Rutgers experience, and to be a greater asset to the public. However, Rutgers Gardens is still perceived as a “hidden gem” by many or as an exclusive or entirely unknown space by others, primarily due to its limited accessibility at present. Rutgers Gardens faces key challenges around access, site maintenance and improvements, and broad awareness and engagement of stakeholders with its offerings. Moving forward, Rutgers Gardens will also have to continue to navigate broader outside influences, including both recognized and unanticipated trends across environmental, social, and economic areas.

Rutgers Gardens’ current site conditions and programming, while limited in some ways, provide a strong base on which to build. There is a plethora of opportunities to expand partnerships, integrate more closely with RU-NB and the RU-NB Academic Master Plan, draw inspiration from other university botanic gardens and arboreta, and to be more engaging, educational, and an asset to all.

WHAT'S NEXT? ESTABLISHING A FUTURE VISION FOR RUTGERS GARDENS

Defining Vision, Mission, and Values

Though far-reaching impacts are desirable, Rutgers Gardens cannot be everything to everyone. With finite resources and grounding within a public land grant university, transforming Rutgers Gardens into a destination botanical garden (e.g., Longwood Gardens) is not feasible, realistic, or appropriate. Nor is returning Rutgers Gardens to function solely as a research farm, given its ingrained public connection and teaching applications. A vision to engage different groups across multiple uses should be holistic and unified; importantly, the Gardens should meet current and future university and community needs.

To address current challenges and better capitalize on its full potential, Rutgers Gardens defines a new vision that charts a course forward toward a sustainable future. This vision is further supported by a revised mission statement and key values for the Garden's educational and visitor experience, internal practice and partnership, and overall organization.



MISSION: Growing from our research roots to thrive as a university botanical garden for all, providing nature-based experiences to educate, engage, and delight



Path to a New Vision

Developing a path to implement the new vision is key. This document serves as a roadmap to guide implementation, with recommendations grouped into four broad themes that reinforce the Vision Plan values and aim to address key challenges and opportunities at Rutgers Gardens. Within each theme are several goals to drive actions moving forward to be considered as actionable steps over the next one to five years.



Enhancing Educational Experience & Engagement

- » Revitalize garden areas for improved education and engagement
- » Expand educational potential through partnerships and programs
- » Facilitate engagement through program offerings, including programs by others
- » Integrate research that aligns with garden experience
- » Improve visitor amenities to enhance experience



Increasing Awareness & Communications

- » Increase student and faculty awareness of utilizing the Gardens
- » Regularly communicate with stakeholders
- » Expand types and methods of marketing
- » Improve branding and image
- » Increase promotional signage and presence
- » Improve engagement of website and social media
- » Showcase historical contributions and importance



Improving Access & Navigation

- » Improve non-automobile access to Rutgers Gardens
- » Ensure safe and accessible parking and vehicular access
- » Improve circulation and increase navigability around Rutgers Gardens
- » Enhance accessibility within the Gardens
- » Create a clearer and more welcoming entry



Strengthening Capacity & Operations

- » Expand staff and resource capacity
- » Continue enhancing membership and volunteer programs
- » Improve analysis and delivery of services
- » Add to operational partnerships
- » Clarify Advisory Board role and structure
- » Expand revenue and fundraising opportunities
- » Capitalize on Vision Plan momentum

Resource & Implementation Needs

This Vision Plan opens the door to new opportunities for resources and funding, both internal and external to the university, that will help to facilitate sustainable operations and support a garden for all. Carrying out all components of the Vision Plan will require resources beyond Rutgers Gardens' current capacity. Addressing this gap can be done using a variety of strategies, such as:

- » expanding services and resources through partnerships;
- » contracting selected landscape and professional services;
- » further engaging community and university volunteers;
- » hiring additional staff, interns, and student workers; and
- » increasing industry connections for support services.

Strategies should consider what resources may be best suited for certain work, and that some resources may not be able to perform certain tasks.

As a public university and community asset, not all programming at Rutgers Gardens is expected to generate revenue or a direct financial return on investment; many activities may instead yield important educational and engagement outcomes. As such, it is important that Rutgers Gardens not operate strictly for financial gain but instead make use of a variety of funding sources to support its ongoing operations. More strategic spending to achieve Vision Plan recommendations will need to be coupled with overall operating budget increases and capital funding to best support ongoing care for the Gardens and new improvements resulting from the Vision Plan. Such funding support may come from a variety of sources, including grants, gifts of varying sizes and types, internally generated revenue, and University support. More opportunities may also become available as Rutgers Gardens aligns with larger University initiatives through the Vision Plan.

Living Our Vision

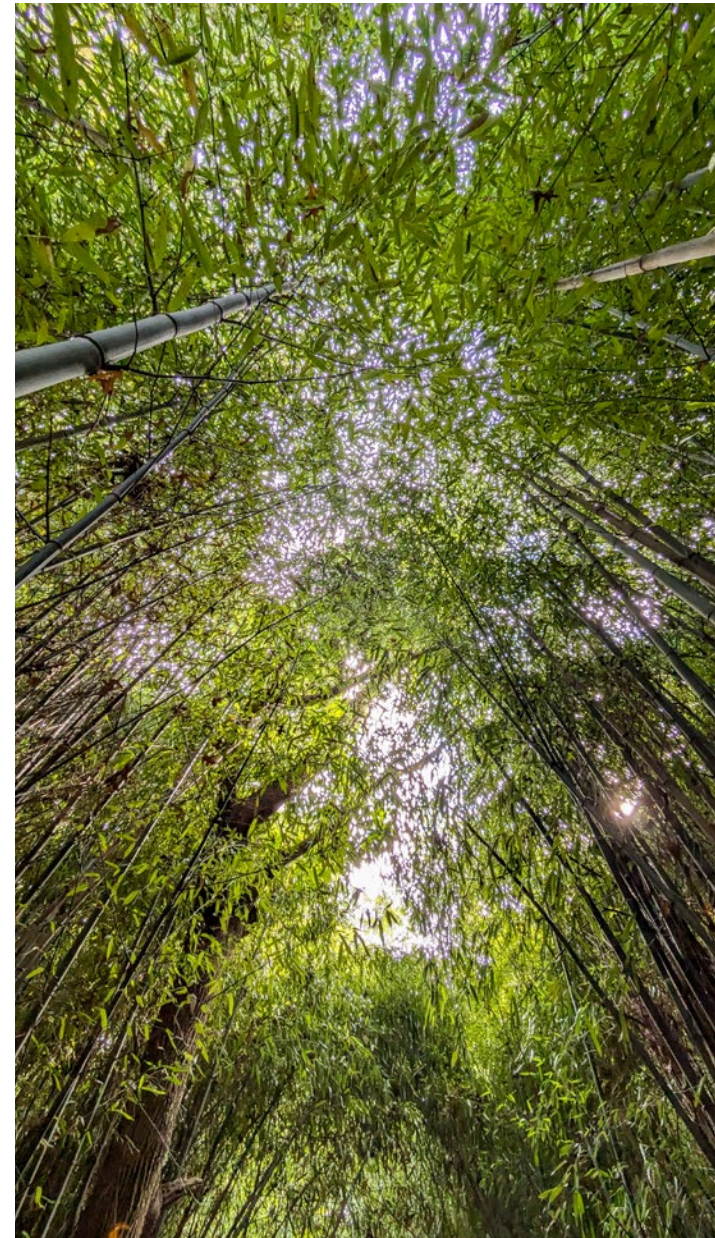
MEASURING PROGRESS

Tracking and evaluating progress toward achieving the goals and recommendations set forth will be key to the overall success of the Vision Plan. Progress and success should be measured by multiple metrics. These may include identifying completed recommendations, collecting and tracking evaluations and surveys by different user groups over time, and analyzing trends of data collected in association with programs, class use, research, etc. A small group, whether the Advisory Board in a revised role and/or a university-based committee, could help further implementation of the Vision Plan and evaluation of progress over time.

CELEBRATING THE NEW VISION

A series of events and programs that highlight and celebrate central aspects of the Vision Plan are recommended to invite participation and generate excitement among the university and public communities. These may capitalize on implemented short-term recommendations and could include farm-to-table receptions, an inaugural ride on a bus that would connect Cook campus to Rutgers Gardens, open houses featuring student-led projects at Rutgers Gardens, launch of a new visitor map, and restoration of the popular green chairs as a central Gardens feature.







R | Rutgers Gardens

*Improving the educational garden,
farm, and forest experience for all
through redefined vision, mission,
values, and goals*



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