

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

THE GARDENS AT ELM BANK BICENTENARY MASTER PLAN



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MASSACHUSETTS HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Massachusetts Horticultural Society (Mass Hort) recently completed the implementation of its original 20-year Master Plan at the historic Elm Bank estate, with more than 16 acres of gardens now under cultivation. After 20 years, Mass Hort is now settled into its home at Elm Bank in Wellesley/Dover, and we stand poised to develop a truly spectacular public garden and open space destination in the heart of the Western Suburbs—only 13 miles from Boston Common. We believe that the time is right for a new Master Plan that will take us to our 200th anniversary in 2029.

The Board and Executive staff are united in our aspiration to position Mass Hort as a world class garden tourism destination that demonstrates the science and practice of horticulture for the 21st century. Our vision is to establish a signature destination garden that displays the highest level of horticultural excellence. Additionally, we strive to offer powerful public education programs about contemporary issues of health, sustainability, and stewardship of our natural world. Our goal is to engage the broadest possible audience to share these experiences.

A robust Master Planning Initiative will support our objective to be proactive about Mass Hort’s future. The Initiative will generate a horticultural programming and education blueprint to drive physical improvements and educational opportunities to the campus and enable us to allocate staff resources strategically. The Master Plan will be a guide to prioritize fundraising efforts for donor cultivation and for planning earned income activities. Additionally, The Master Plan will be a tool to drive active marketing to help enhance public recognition of the Mass Hort brand and engage new stakeholders.

The Mass Hort Master Plan is intended to be a directive for the future: a resilient, flexible, and sustainable document—one that lives and will be continually tested and refined.

History

Founded in Boston in 1829, Massachusetts Horticultural Society is America’s oldest horticultural society. Our early roots were in agriculture and the Society’s focus was on improving the quality and quantity of fruits and vegetables that were sold in Boston’s markets. We stayed true to our motto, *Commune Bonum* (for the public good) and throughout our long legacy we have worked to improve people’s lives through horticulture. In 1831, Mass Hort established Mount Auburn Cemetery as the first Garden Cemetery in America. In the mid-1800’s we worked with inner-city schools to develop school gardening and window box movements for immigrant children to connect them to nature and better nutrition. And, during the Great Depression and World War II, we helped urban dwellers plant Victory Gardens to help feed their families.

The Cheney Estate

In 1874, the property known as Elm Bank in the Natick Plain was acquired by Benjamin Cheney, a businessman nationally known for merging his delivery company with American Express Company and Wells Fargo. This country gentleman’s estate extended over 200 acres and was bordered on three sides by the Charles River. Mr. Cheney constructed a Victorian style mansion, extensive greenhouses and gardens, and gardener’s cottages on the estate. A devotee and patron of the emerging field of ornamental horticulture; he was a member and supporter of Massachusetts Horticultural Society. Upon his death, his daughter, Alice Cheney Baltzell, inherited the home and property. It was Alice and her husband who created the estate we see today—with its neoclassical Georgian Mansion and carriage house built by architects Carrere and Hastings. The married couple also directed the Olmsted Brothers Firm to create the historic landscapes, including the Italianate, Temple, and Asian Gardens.



Today

Since 1998, Mass Hort has been steward of the Elm Bank property, with its headquarters and education center located in the Elm Bank Reservation. In 1996, Mass Hort assumed a 100-year renewable lease on the property after many years of it being vacant and listed as surplus with the Commonwealth. A substantial financial commitment to capital improvements was required by Mass Hort to obtain the lease on the interior 36 acres and all the buildings. The property is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

An educational nonprofit with 4,500 members, Mass Hort is led by Katherine K. Macdonald, Executive Director/President and includes a team of 12 employees and a large contingent of volunteers. The Board of Trustees has 17 members, of which R. Wayne Mezitt is Chairman. There is also a Board of Overseers, whose 20 members contribute significant time, expertise, and resources to promoting the vision of the Society. We welcome over 60,000 people to the site each year.

Mission Statement

Massachusetts Horticultural Society is dedicated to encouraging the science and practice of horticulture and to developing the public's enjoyment, appreciation, and understanding of plants and the environment.

Strategic Plan

In 2013, Mass Hort developed a new strategic plan to lay out our vision for the next ten years, which include: helping the greater community better understand the natural world and appreciate stewardship of plants, gardens, and the environment; establishing Elm Bank as a premier destination for garden tourism in New England; showcasing Mass Hort as a primary resource for horticultural knowledge and best practices in the Northeast; and promoting horticulture for the public good, as we have done since 1829.



The Gardens at Elm Bank

The historic and contemporary gardens at Elm Bank demonstrate how plants and design are an integral part of everyday life for people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. Gardens connect people to plants and to the environment through sustainable design, interpretation, cultural practices, and pure enjoyment. Our 12 gardens, with over 16 acres under cultivation, offer a variety to visitors: Weezie’s Garden for Children, designed by Julia Moir Messervy, The Bressingham Garden of perennial landscapes designed by English Nurseryman, Adrian Bloom, Olmsted Brother’s historic Italianate Garden, New England Trial Garden, the Seed to Table Garden, and Society gardens.

Education

Mass Hort’s education programs include horticultural lecture series, workshops, children’s programs in Weezie’s Garden for Children, and a traveling science van, the Plantmobile, which visits schools and events.

School Gardens

Working with educators and school systems, Mass Hort helps develop school garden programs that provide garden-based learning experiences for students of all ages.

Library and Archives

Mass Hort’s library collection includes 26,000 books on site and an additional 5,000 rare books, manuscripts, and prints in archival storage. In 2015 our library partnered with the Digital Commonwealth to scan the images of over 1,000 botanical prints and put them in the public domain for people to enjoy on-line.



MASTER PLAN PROJECT

Why now?

The overall physical facilities and grounds at Elm Bank require significant investment to support Mass Hort's programs and operations; a strategy is needed to prioritize maintenance, repair, and redesign efforts.

Capital investments and a Garden Tourism business strategy will help Mass Hort deliver its mission into the 21st Century. After extensive improvements to the property, The Gardens at Elm Bank formally opened as a garden tourism destination in 2015 with daily programming in the gardens from May to October. Services, amenities, and campus circulation (pedestrian & vehicular) and parking currently do not effectively support the unrealized potential of the extraordinary natural environment and physical facilities. The Olmsted Firm's Asian and Temple gardens have yet to be restored and would offer unique experiences for visitors.

There is a critical need to decide the future of Elm Bank's most significant asset, The Manor House, which is the central element of the landscape. What happens with it will impact other planning and financial decision-making. The house has been vacant for 30 years. A feasibility study of its renovation and adaptive reuse that is consistent with Mass Hort's mission is imperative.

SCOPE OF THE BICENTENARY MASTER PLAN

- **A long term (10 - 12 year) innovative programmatic vision for The Gardens at Elm Bank and companion short term (2 - 3 year) implementation strategy for priority projects that looks at the gardens, grounds, and current structures.**
- **Create a plan to develop The Gardens at Elm Bank as a world class garden tourism destination that will enable Mass Hort to carry out its mission in the 21st century of connecting people to plants, historic landscapes, and the natural world. This plan is to address gardens, circulation (both pedestrian and vehicle), visitor amenities (such as visitor center, café, and gift shop), and a unique niche in the horticultural world.**
- **Manor House: a central element in the historic landscape is the 1908 neoclassical Georgian Manor House. The Master Plan will investigate the feasibility of its renovation and adaptive reuse, which is sustainable and provides a financial return to Mass Hort.**





PREVIOUS STUDIES

In 1998, Mass Hort adopted a Master Plan for the creation of a Horticulture Center at Elm Bank. It was prepared by the internationally recognized Dutch firm, Eurolandscape. Much of what you see on the ground today conforms to that plan. In 1999, one of Mass Hort's first tasks was the commissioning of a comprehensive site assessment, performed by Beals and Thomas, Inc.

FINANCIALS

The Society's operating budget for FY17 (October 1, 2016 – September 30, 2017) is \$1.6 million. Mass Hort, a 501-(c) (3) charity and, is financially supported by donors, members, corporations, foundations, and a wedding and mission-supporting events business.

FUNDING

Based on master plans of similar botanical institutions, Mass Hort's Board of Trustees has voted to spend \$250,000 on a consultant team of landscape and building architects, and preservationists, with the expertise to lead the development of this plan for Mass Hort's future. Companies will answer an RFP process and demonstrate their capabilities. A committee of staff and trustees will review their credentials as part of the selection process. We are seeking funding from private individuals, corporations, and foundations.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information and how you can help us reach our fundraising goal, please contact:

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