

What tastes like home? Social science research on inclusive garden experiences

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Keywords: design, inclusive, partnerships, research, social science

Botanic Gardens are unique spaces where people can connect with plants in powerful, personally relevant ways. As botanic gardens strive to diversify their audiences and provide a welcoming environment, the community could advance this effort through research on what contributes to creating an inclusive environment. While there is research on how experiences in natural spaces benefit health and well-being as well as on how people learn in gardens, understanding the factors that foster feelings of inclusivity in botanic gardens is not well studied. The United States Botanic Garden (USBG) is partnering with the Center of Science and Industry's Center for Research and Evaluation (COSI's CRE) to study visitor engagement with 'What Tastes Like Home', an interactive element in the USBG exhibition *Cultivate: Growing Food in a Changing World*. In this interactive, visitors are invited to contribute their personal reflection to the prompt, "What tastes like home?" by placing a note with their response on a wall in the exhibition. The rich, personal contributions by our diverse visitors inspired the USBG to collaborate with CRE's social science researchers on a project to better understand what was happening during this visitor experience. Through observations, surveys, interviews, and a literature review, we seek to answer the research question, "In what ways can public garden designers best utilize the unique public garden environment to create inclusive learning settings for all?" The research is multidisciplinary but draws especially from anthropology and psychology scholarship. Through this project we aim to gain insights into how gardens can design inclusive experiences while also demonstrating the importance of partnerships to advance social science research in botanic gardens. This presentation will describe our approach to developing this partnership, the benefits of botanic garden engagement in social science research, the elements of this co-created research project, and our findings thus far.