



The open expansiveness of the great lawn at Lotusland offers maximum flexibility with respect to setup and is conveniently located adjacent to the main house. However, lawns as ground surfaces present challenges with respect to sliding chairs in and out, can be influenced negatively by wet weather, and do not wear well under the pressure of multiple events.

# MONEY DOES GROW ON TREES

## Garden Spaces That Generate Earned Income Through Special Event Rentals

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Who says that money doesn't grow on trees? While taxonomists and genetic engineers have yet to bring this proverb to life, many public gardens and arboreta have beaten them to it. As the embattled economy continues to intensify pressure on Garden administrators to find additional revenue streams, many of them are now capitalizing on the intense beauty of their outdoor spaces. In doing so, they are "turning their trees into treasure."

### Harness the Assets That Attract People

Garden administrators need only to look out their windows to find their institutions' biggest assets—their gardens and grounds, unique settings that other kinds of cultural organizations and institutions can rarely match. People pay to visit, stroll, and take in all of the beauty that gardens and arboreta have to offer, and some of these same people would also pay to hold their special events in such surroundings. This article focuses on the use of outdoor gardens for special events—for the sole purpose of increasing earned revenue.

### Target Outdoor Spaces

Public gardens and arboreta are increasingly becoming settings for elaborate weddings and parties, special social events, corporate functions, birthday and/or tea parties, fundraising events, and art exhibits. However, to accommodate such events, gardens must address a myriad of special considerations. These could include addressing the actual physical design of the space, associated amenities, the logistical support apparatus (staff or outside vendors), and behind-the-scenes setup and teardown operations, while taking into account potential garden damage or visitor disruptions.

Gardens must be able to provide desirable spaces for special events that accommodate a variety of needs. Some clients may desire isolation and privacy, others may want direct access to meeting rooms, and still others (probably the majority) may simply want a spectacular garden setting. Will a speaker's podium be needed? If so, it should be positioned facing an unobstructed, open-seating area with a northwest to southeast orientation so that no one has to look directly into the sun. If catering is involved, provisions must be made.

### Manage the Events

Having desirable rental spaces is only half of the equation. Gardens must have the proper facilities and organizational infrastructure in place to be able to book and manage such events. This usually requires the efforts of a full-time staff person or a special events manager to coordinate marketing, meet with potential clients, book events, manage client expectations, and coordinate event logistics.

An Internet search of garden websites revealed that many gardens have established rental facility programs involving outdoor garden spaces. Norfolk Botanical Garden's website states that its garden is a "splendid backdrop for any occasion" and identifies nine specific garden areas that are available for rent. The site posts each garden's size, maximum occupancy, seasonal availability, and associated fees, and also suggests the types of events best suited to each space. Other public gardens and arboreta offer a smaller number of rentable outdoor spaces for limited types of events. Weddings, by far, seem to be the most marketed type of event.

The Hill Garden at Birmingham Botanical Gardens is the perfect event space allowing for separation of use areas (cocktails, desserts, and dinner seating, etc.). Spatial design separation elements are transparent as to allow visibility into the adjoining spaces. The garden has a pavilion incorporated into the design to provide protection from rain, and its ground surface areas are paved or compacted gravel which accommodate heavy foot traffic well.

IMAGE PROVIDED BY BIRMINGHAM BOTANICAL GARDENS.



### Determine Whether Appropriate Spaces Exist or Need to Be Created

Many of today's event gardens have been adapted from an existing framework of gardens that were designed and built before it became fashionable or even necessary to use those areas as money-generating event spaces. Given that the staging and functioning of special events were often not considered during the design process, trying to execute special events in such spaces may prove to be difficult. Operational challenges can arise from the physical arrangement of the space or its relationship, or lack thereof, to other adjacent spaces; lack of proper infrastructure; relative isolation making servicing difficult; and lack of direct access to parking or restroom facilities.

Julie Anderson, Cleveland Botanical Garden's director of operations, recommends that spaces be "flexible with respect to their configuration." Having the ability to rearrange a space for a particular event by reconfiguring large planters, adjusting seating, and moving overhead canopies provides greater flexibility for a garden whose rentable space may be limited, she explained.

### Designing a Money Garden— Things to Consider

Before institutions adapt their existing gardens or consider starting new ones, they should take garden event spaces and their requirements into account during the design phase. The objective for planning should be fourfold: 1) to offer the greatest variety of rentable space for the most diverse types of events; 2) to design the gardens so that the special provisions needed to choreograph event logistics are

manageable; 3) to ensure that the staff and gardens are not overtly stressed by special event setup and teardown and that event foot traffic is not detrimental to the horticultural health of the plants within the garden spaces; and, 4) to prevent everyday garden patrons from being adversely impacted by the event.

With the above in mind, gardens may want to consider the following design ideas when planning how best to use garden spaces for revenue-generating purposes:

**Include stakeholders in the strategic planning process.** Host planning and design workshops or charrettes with key stakeholders, including staff and vendors aware of logistical requirements.

**Consider the garden area locations and how they should function.** The locations should be easily accessible and near the garden's entrance. If the rental spaces are deeper within the garden, they should be adjacent to a pathway wide enough to accommodate vehicular traffic.

**Provide different sizes and varieties of activity spaces.** As a rule, each person at an event needs fourteen to eighteen square feet of space. A two-hundred-person event requires at least 2,800 to 3,600 square feet of space. Being able to market a variety of garden spaces is beneficial and gives an institution the flexibility to have a

number of different-sized outdoor events going on simultaneously.

**Look at the impact on the garden.** Anticipate how foot traffic could impact plantings and turf. Turf and gravel ground surfaces present challenges. Event areas are best held on paved surfaces or firmly compacted surfaces such as decomposed, compacted gravel.

**Anticipate catering needs and restroom access.** When preparing meals in outdoor settings, caterers usually need a twenty-by-twenty-foot tent with direct access to water, electricity, and lighting. Ideally, a preparation area should be within fifty feet of an event area. The farther away from the event space, the more staff is needed to service the event.

"Typically caterers like to park a refrigerated truck adjacent to their workstation tent so vehicular access to the catering staging area is needed," said Louise Narourney of Cuisine & Company in Virginia Beach, Virginia. "Additionally, caterers like to have cocktails and dinners separated due to differing setup and servicing requirements. So spaces should be designed with a main event space and also have associated or flanking spaces for cocktail and dessert service tables," she added.

Most party patrons do not like to travel large distances or leave the event site to use



The proposed wedding garden at Cylburn Arboretum in Baltimore has been specifically designed to accommodate weddings. All of the necessary logistical operations associated with these types of special events have been factored into the layout of the garden.

GRAPHIC BY OASIS DESIGN GROUP

the restrooms. Narourney recommends that clean, well-lighted facilities be located within two hundred feet of the event, and that when renting portable toilets, three be procured for every one hundred guests with two for the ladies and one for the men.

**Have convenient service routes to event spaces.** Access into the garden to the event space by a vehicle such as a golf cart or small box truck is required to facilitate setup and teardown, access by catering staff, and the transport of handicapped guests.

**Plan for appropriate levels of support infrastructure.** Electricity, in some instances a 220-volt service, is a must. Generators are expensive and noisy and should be avoided. Water and lighting also need to be available.

**Make provisions for permanent and/or temporary covered shelter.** Always have a backup plan in case of poor weather. Consider the impact of the sun just as much as the rain. Spaces should be equipped with either overhead, permanent structures or be designed to accommodate a tent. Average tent sizes vary from twenty by forty feet to sixty by one hundred ten feet. Pole tents require staking with additional space needed outside for tie downs. Frame tents are self-supporting but generally take more time to set up and, thus, are more expensive.

**Determine whether events will be held at night.** If so, make provisions for proper lighting, and illuminate any steps or steep paths. Decide how you will control insects. Will screened-in areas be provided to create bug-free zones? Will garden areas be sprayed in advance of an event? Will citronella candles or torches be situated in certain locations? Will outdoor heaters be used?

**Think like a professional photographer.** Where are the best places to stage event photographs? "Rose gardens tend to be the most popular places," according to Lee Chapman, private event and tour coordinator at Iowa State University's Reiman Gardens. The best-looking gardens are where people want to have their events. Spare no dollars in their design and construction because they will pay dividends over and over again.

**Take into account government regulations and legal ramifications.** Are there local ordinances that would hinder large-scale events because of noise or lighting limitations? Make sure that fire and safety codes are known and followed. Gardens may need to increase their liability insurance because of an anticipated influx of visitors; therefore, gardens may want to consult with their legal and insurance counsels.

**Initiate or review your existing crisis plan or backup plans.** A written crisis communication plan (or critical incident response plan) should be in place. The proactive plan would briefly outline how the garden would respond to critical situations such as fire, health incidents, weather-related scenarios, or power outages.

As you can see, gardens and arboreta wanting to maximize their gardens' assets should have a variety of properly designed and highly desirable garden spaces for special events. In addition, gardens and arboreta should have policies, procedures, and staff in place to appropriately accommodate and manage such events so that special event rentals are a welcome part of garden operations and not a burden on staff or the gardens themselves. With all of the above firmly in place, gardens and arboreta can enjoy a profitable revenue stream that capitalizes on their greatest assets in a world where people are always seeking beauty and are willing to pay for it.

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