



Planning for the Future

2021-2023 Strategic Plan

and

10-Year Strategic Vision

January, 2021

Planning Consultants:



Executive Summary

First opened in 1999 and located on the Cuyamaca College campus, the Water Conservation Garden's (The Garden's) mission is **to inspire positive change in the living environment through the conservation of water and other natural resources**. We accomplish this through the garden itself, a model of sustainability and low-water-use and a peaceful place for people to enjoy nature. We also accomplish our mission through our award-winning Ms. Smarty-Plants™ education programs, events and community partnerships. The Water Conservation Authority (WCA), a Joint Powers Authority consisting of five water agencies and the Grossmont Cuyamaca Community College District, owns The Garden and contracts with the Friends of the Water Conservation Garden, a nonprofit organization, to operate it. The Water Conservation Authority also provides major funding for The Garden.



Why We Exist / What We're Best At:

- **Beautiful, Water-Efficient California Landscapes:** As a specialty demonstration garden, we grow beautiful, low water use California landscapes to learn from and enjoy
- **Education & Inspiration:** We inspire and educate so people of all ages can connect with plants and nature and build a better planet for future generations
- **Wellness & Sense of Community:** We provide a peaceful space and nurture a sense of wellness and community for all
- **Sustainability:** We demonstrate that beautiful landscapes can be achieved by prioritizing sustainability for all natural resources

In the summer of 2020 amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, our Board of Directors and staff embarked on a strategic planning process to set a long-term (ten year) Strategic Vision for the organization and develop three-year Strategic Priorities and a plan to begin to work toward the vision. While the pandemic has been a challenge, it has also elevated the critical role we play as a safe, outdoor space and place of beauty, peace and respite for the community. We believe there is an opportunity to build upon our strengths and increase The Garden's impact in the years to come.

Ten-Year Strategic Vision: By 2030, we will have successfully grown The Garden's impact through growth in our footprint, plant ecosystem, attendance, membership, education

programs and support, and we will have leveraged our key assets including the garden itself, our unique Ms. Smarty-Plants™ youth education programs and events to become an attraction and resource throughout and beyond San Diego.

As we work toward our ten-year vision, The Garden team will be intentional and track milestones and metrics tied to: Education, Reach & Impact, Growing & Nurturing of The Garden, Increased Support, and a Strong Organizational Foundation.

Three-Year Strategic Priorities (2021-2023)

To accomplish our Strategic Vision, our Strategic Priorities will help us focus our efforts over the next three years:



Education: Increase and develop additional educational opportunities for children and adults

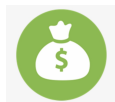


Visitor Experience/"WOW Factor": Enhance The Garden's visitor/member experience



Innovation & Modernization: Ensure The Garden is innovative as it grows

Visibility: Increase The Garden's relationships and visibility in the regional community and beyond, resulting in growth and diversification of The Garden's visitors and members



Financial Sustainability: Continue to strengthen The Garden's financial sustainability and foundation for growth



Team Development: Grow and diversify the Board and enhance the development and satisfaction of all Garden team members (Board, Committees, Docents, Volunteers, Staff and Interns)

Our Board and staff has developed a Year-One Action Plan for each Strategic Priority, and will work with committees, volunteers, staff and community partners to execute our Strategic Plan. The overarching theme for Year-One (2021) is **ensuring a strong foundation for future growth**. As we come out of the pandemic and look to the future, we are excited to partner with the community and work toward our Strategic Vision.

Thank you to our WCA partners for supporting the Garden:



Introduction

First opened with a four and a half acre plot on the Cuyamaca College campus in 1999, The Water Conservation Garden's (The Garden's) mission is **to inspire positive change in the living environment through the conservation of water and other natural resources**. The Garden now encompasses six acres of beautiful, low-water-use gardens for all to enjoy. In addition to the garden itself, we offer education programs for youth through our award-winning Ms. Smarty-Plants programs, workshops, special events and a variety of ways to get involved as a volunteer at The Garden. Our history is unique--The Garden was conceived and founded by local water districts in response to the drought in the early 1990s. Today, the Water Conservation Garden Authority, a Joint Powers Authority consisting of five water districts (The City of San Diego, San Diego County, Helix, Otay and Sweetwater) and the Grossmont Cuyamaca Community College District, owns and supports The Garden and a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, Friends of the Water Conservation Garden, operates it. Our history as a drought-tolerant demonstration garden is still important today, while our focus has broadened to include other aspects of sustainability. The Garden's core strengths and differentiators include:

- **Beautiful, Water-Efficient California Landscapes:** As a specialty demonstration garden, we grow beautiful, low water use California landscapes to learn from and enjoy
- **Education & Inspiration:** We inspire and educate so people of all ages can connect with plants and nature, and build a better planet for future generations
- **Wellness & Sense of Community:** We provide a peaceful space and nurture a sense of wellness and community for all
- **Sustainability:** We demonstrate that beautiful landscapes can be achieved by prioritizing sustainability for all natural resources

In 2020, The Garden (and the world) found itself in an interesting time. The COVID-19 global pandemic forced us to close The Garden for a period of time. Schools that were longtime education partners no longer had in-person students, field trips or school assemblies for our Ms. Smarty-Plants program. Like all organizations, we had to adapt to not only survive the pandemic, but to come out stronger. Our Board decided to be bold and leverage this time to develop a Ten-Year Strategic Vision for The Garden. This document captures the context and content of the Water Conservation Garden's Ten-Year Strategic Vision as well as our 2021-2023 Strategic Plan.

Where we are Headed Next:

Overview of The Garden's Strategic Vision 2021-2030

To initiate The Garden's strategic visioning and planning process, in the summer of 2020 we began a multipronged discovery process to gather input and ideas from key stakeholder groups. Below is a recap of the key themes/findings from the discovery process. These findings and overall implications helped shape our Ten-Year Strategic Vision.

Discovery Process to Inform Ten-Year Strategic Vision and Strategic Plan Included:

- **Board, Staff, Volunteers/Docents:** Input captured through one-on-one interviews, an all-staff survey, the Strategic Planning Committee, and participation from staff and docent representatives and the full board in the two-day planning session
- **External Stakeholders & Research:** Key stakeholder interviews conducted by NP Strategies with partners, potential partners, funders and other organizations; interviews with representatives from the WCA Board, and benchmark research on other botanic gardens
- **Members:** Administered a member survey and received 103 responses (20% response rate; valid results); respondents included both new and longtime members
- **Visitors:** Strategic Planning Committee members conducted visitor questionnaires with Garden visitors over a two-week period from 8/25-9/5; 57 groups completed the questionnaire; 76% of visitors that completed the questionnaire had been to The Garden before; half of first-time visitors joined The Garden that day

A number of key themes and implications emerged from the discovery process. These informed our visioning discussions and decisions regarding priorities for the next three years.

1. Internal stakeholders share a sense of pride in The Garden

- The sense of pride and commitment to The Garden is palpable
- Roots as a water conservation demonstration garden is still important today
- Volunteers are recognized as critical to The Garden's success
- Education is fully embraced as a critical component of The Garden's identity and purpose, with Ms. Smarty-Plants™ recognized as outstanding and a unique asset

"My initial impression of The Garden was that it was very unexpected. I knew it was there...but I was quite impressed and pleasantly surprised. I was expecting a garden, but not the full operation that it is." - Current Partner

2. Garden visitors and members are highly satisfied

- Nearly all visitors said they will come again
- Overall, average member satisfaction score: 9 out of 10
- 95% of members are highly likely to recommend The Garden to a friend
- 96% of members are definitely or likely to renew their membership

"The Garden is one of the my top favorite places in San Diego. It is clearly so loved and that feeling emanates throughout. I always leave feeling calm and at peace" - Member

3. Education programs are considered best-in-class

- Internally, education is fully embraced as a critical component of The Garden's identity and purpose (Ms. Smarty-Plants recognized as outstanding and a unique



asset)

- External stakeholders interviewed shared that field trips and education programs are considered to be excellent, interactive and cost effective. Educators and children love Ms. Smart-Plants™

“One of the best things the Garden has is education. It is top-notch.” - Water District

4. Most people hear about The Garden through word of mouth

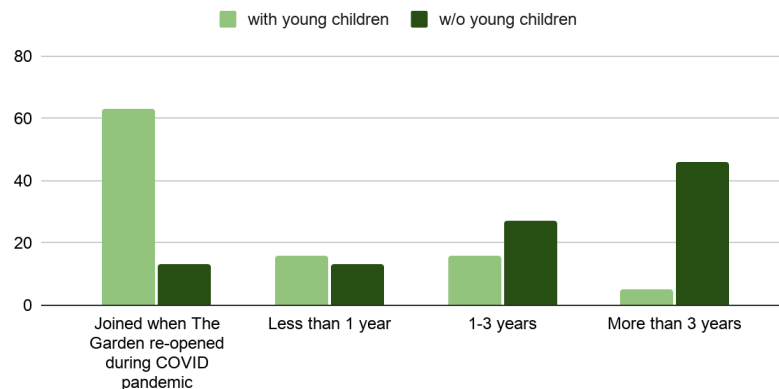
- According to both visitors and members, the top four ways people hear about The Garden include (in this order): A Family/Friend/Neighbor told me about The Garden, Online (e.g. Yelp, Social Media), Local to the area/I drove by, and through Cuyamaca College (e.g. student, former student)
- Stakeholder often described The Garden as a “hidden gem”, which highlighted both a strength and an opportunity for improvement

“The Garden is a hidden gem in East County.” - External Stakeholder

5. More families with children are starting to join The Garden, diversifying the visitor and member mix

- Families with children is a growing member segment; they primarily join for the atmosphere, things to do with children and for the member benefits whereas members without children primarily join to support The Garden’s mission and learn about gardening

Member Mix: Comparing Length of Membership and Child Status (with / without young children)



6. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role The Garden plays in the community

- The Garden has a unique opportunity during the COVID-19 pandemic as a safe outdoor space
- Visitors frequently refer to the calm, peaceful feeling at The Garden and the respite it can provide all that visit

“There is an opportunity during COVID to attract more people to The Garden and expand on the appeal of outdoor spaces.” - Local Business

“I love the peacefulness and beauty of The Garden.” - Member

“The Garden is a nice, meditative place to just walk around, whether alone or with someone.” - Member

7. Opportunities center around increased visibility, growing The Garden’s reach and impact, and continuing to strengthen the organization for the future

- Regarding future opportunities, visitors and members recommended more interactive exhibits, more labels and information about plants, and various things that would add to their overall experience such as a coffee/beverage and snack cart, more shade, etc.
- Other stakeholders cited opportunities to increase The Garden’s visibility through partnerships and events (when The Garden is able post-pandemic), as well as continued strengthening of The Garden’s operations (e.g. sufficient staffing, Board growth and diversification, etc.)

A summary of these findings is included in the summary SWOT analysis included below (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats):

<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People - strength of current leadership, staff team, volunteers/docents • Education programs - Ms. Smarty-Plants • Beautiful and peaceful design and atmosphere of the Garden • Recent improvements in org systems/processes • Track record of excellent events 	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses/Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing (“hidden gem”) • Facility needs: office space, restrooms, kitchen, gift shop • Staff and volunteer capacity - potential for burnout • Continued need for basic garden improvements • Additional system/process improvements (data and reporting, donation processing)
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging community need the Garden fills at this point in time (outdoor setting, nature) • Growth - physical space, visibility, budget, etc. • Stepping into a broader purpose (sustainability, wellness) • Leveraging Ms. Smarty-Plants • Increasing use of venue/facilities • Furthering partnerships (existing and new - e.g. WCA, college) • More and unique special events & classes • Recognizing docents/volunteers more • Donor/foundation stewardship • Creating new revenue opportunities 	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of COVID-19 on fundraising, events and education • Other options for people’s time • Increased competition for adult education programs • Increased competition threatens Garden’s uniqueness

Based on this input our Board of Directors, staff and Strategic Planning Committee developed our Ten Year Strategic Vision:

The Water Conservation Garden's Strategic Vision 2021-2030

By 2030, we will have successfully grown The Garden's impact through growth in our footprint, plant ecosystem, attendance, membership, education programs and support, and we will have leveraged our key assets including the garden itself, our unique Ms. Smarty-Plants™ youth education programs and events to become an attraction and resource throughout and beyond San Diego.



To track progress toward this Strategic Vision, The Garden will intentionally focus on and track milestones/metrics over the ten years around:

- Education, Reach & Impact (e.g. membership growth, visitor growth and diversification, school partnerships, education program results, etc.)
- Garden Growing & Nurturing (e.g. plant ecosystem, garden footprint, innovation)
- Increased Support (contributions, grants, earned revenue)
- Strong Organizational Foundation (board growth and diversification, staff and infrastructure)

2021-2023 Strategic Priorities

To accomplish our Strategic Vision, the following Strategic Priorities will help us focus our efforts over the next three years (2021-2023):



Education: Increase and develop additional educational opportunities for children and adults



Visitor Experience/"WOW Factor": Enhance The Garden's visitor/member experience



Innovation & Modernization: Ensure The Garden is innovative as it grows



Visibility: Increase The Garden's outreach and visibility in the regional community and beyond, resulting in growth and diversification of the Garden's visitors and members



Financial Sustainability: Continue to strengthen The Garden's financial sustainability and foundation for growth



Team Development: Grow and diversify the Board and enhance the development and satisfaction of all Garden team members (Board, Committees, Docents, Volunteers, Staff and Interns)

Implementation

The Strategic Planning Committee and Board agreed that making the Strategic Plan a living document is key to success. Agreements for plan implementation include:

- This plan outlines a ten-year vision that we expect will be complete in ten years, even if annual goals need to be modified
- Yearly priorities are aspirational and dependent upon funding and may need to wait until funding is identified
- Strategic Priorities and Goals will be reviewed by the staff and Board at least once a year as part of the annual budget preparation, and modified as necessary
- Priorities and goals may be changed by the Board if they are no longer feasible or need to be modified due to a change in conditions or circumstances
- We will integrate Strategic Plan discussions into each Board and Committee meeting; our Strategic Planning Committee will continue to meet and be guide the process

Appendix A: Year-One Action Plan (2021)

Strategic Priority	2021 Goals (Bold=highest priorities in 2021)
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adapt Ms. Smarty-Plants™ virtually and develop and implement a plan to increase her presence on site as well as back into schools ● Seek funding for Spanish MSP ● Identify funding for completion and publication of MSP book ● Increase education programs to pre-pandemic levels
Visitor Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Seek funding to complete (when feasible) a comprehensive site development plan¹ (architectural plan) that aligns with our strategic plan and lays out a ten-year vision for The Garden's enhancement and expansion ● Continue to assess and improve lighting and electrical ● Secure "Free Days" funding ● Improve systems for member communication and engagement ● Select and implement at least one interactive/manipulative project in an existing exhibit in The Garden (e.g. something for kids)
Innovation & Modernization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Prioritize* Garden upkeep and maintenance projects and create a schedule to ensure The Garden looks refreshed and visitor-ready, and utilizes sustainable practices in all areas ● Complete irrigation project (IRWM project) ● Implement 19 QR codes in The Garden ● Benchmark other gardens re: innovation/modernization ● As we add new signage, utilize new format (e.g. what we used at the classroom) and incorporate more interpretive signage in the Garden ● Continue to implement more engraved, small plant signage in The Garden for prominent and unique species ● Explore options for audio education and plant identification and seek funding <p><i>*Priorities per list - Facilities & Exhibits Committee</i></p>
Visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify diverse groups to connect with in our relationship-building efforts and develop outreach plan ● Seek one or more partnerships that help us stand out as a wellness destination

¹ In 2022, The Garden will approve a Site Development Plan that may include any new buildings, exhibits, trails, lighting, landscape improvements, educational elements, interpretive signage, audio enhancements, food/beverage concession, new technology improvements, and all major architectural improvements to be completed by 2030. All projects will include cost estimates and staff requirements for completion. Each year, chosen projects from the Site Development Plan will be included in the budget and fundraising goals will include those projects. Our goal is to complete implementation of the Site Development Plan by 2030 and develop a new 10-year plan.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop and begin to execute a local business outreach program ● Grow/extend social media community
Financial Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop a plan to grow and diversify revenue streams to sustain operations and meet loan obligations with focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Grow membership to 1,000 members ○ Secure education funding of \$125,000 ○ Plan for revenue growth for outside events and rentals ● Update development, membership and stewardship plans <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Implement a donor stewardship and recognition program (e.g. complete donor wall, recognition in <i>in BLOOM</i>, etc.) ● Invest in and refine financial and administrative systems to allow for accurate and efficient reporting, tracking, and planning
Team Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create a culture of philanthropy and train all team members to participate in peer-to-peer fundraising, especially in 2021 ● Invest in Board development and training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Invest in Board training on board role as a body and as individual members ○ Shift structure of Board time to make it more interactive and generative ○ Evaluate current committee structure against the strategic plan to clarify committee charters, committee structure and direction ● Grow the Board to 15 members in Year One <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Utilize Governance Committee to guide strategic, intentional Board and Committee prospecting and recruitment ○ Increase Board diversity ○ Strengthen and grow the Development Committee as a pathway to Board recruitment ● Invest in staff infrastructure, training and development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Develop and implement customer service training (single message) for all employees/volunteers; build into new hire orientation ○ Add staff as financially feasible and needed to help implement this strategic plan ● Nurture our docent and volunteer corps

Appendix B: Draft Action Plan for 2022 & 2023

(will be reviewed and updated before the end of 2021)

Strategic Priority	DRAFT 2022-2023 Goals
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify and seek multi-year funders for education programs ● Grow current programs ● Develop new programs for youth and adults
Visitor Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Select architect to develop site development plan ● Expand fenced area in the Oak Grove area (grant proposal being submitted July, 2021) ● Consider and plan for exhibits that focus on the interaction between plants and animals (e.g. hummingbirds, bees, insects) and plan for volunteer corps to care for them to ensure a healthy ecosystem ● Branding/Signage for The Garden at the entrance, college entrance and on Jamacha Rd. (County Rd.) ● Implement a beverage cart ● Incorporate more shade and comfortable seating
Innovation & Modernization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure all signage is the new signage format. Types of signage: Identifications, Area signs (butterfly garden, etc.), Interpretive ● Implement audio education and plant identification into The Garden ● Innovate around exhibits/education connected to any new water conservation regulations ● Define and build a Garden plant inventory for education and marketing purposes
Visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify needs for branding and marketing and a plan for increased visibility ● Develop a PR packet ● Continue to grow/extend social media community ● Secure one or more features in major San Diego publications (e.g. <i>San Diego Magazine</i>) ● Implement outreach plan for diverse groups ● Execute local business outreach program ● Explore opportunities to grow Ms. Smarty-Plants beyond local partners
Financial Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grow membership to 2,000 (2022: 1,500; 2023: 2,000) ● Based on comprehensive site plan, develop and begin executing fund development plan with clear menu of funding opportunities ● Based on comprehensive site plan, develop and launch a legacy or other campaign (will need to agree on priority of the campaign: endowment, capital growth) ● Develop a capital improvement plan linked to comprehensive site plan ● Successfully re-negotiate the WCA funding agreement (start end of

	<p>year 1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Work with Finance Committee to review and update policies
Team Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Grow the Board to 20 by the end of 2023 ● Diversify all volunteer positions ● Continue to invest in and support development of The Garden team (continuation of Year-One Goals)

Appendix C: Summary of the Strategic Planning Process

Our strategic planning process included extensive input gathering, planning sessions that involved the Board, docents and staff, and work in our Committees. The Garden contracted with NP Strategies (www.npstrategies.org), a nonprofit consulting organization, to guide our planning process. An overview of the planning process is included below:

Phase 1: Input Gathering (July - Sept)	Phase 2: Virtual Planning Sessions (via Zoom) (Oct)	Phase 3: Plan Development (Nov - Dec)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gather input through internal interviews, staff survey, visitor questionnaire, member survey, external interviews, benchmark research on other gardens Strategic Planning Committee mtgs Prepare and send materials to the Board in advance of planning sessions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board/planning session participants to review materials in advance and come prepared to discuss 	<p><u>Session 1 (10/15) - 10:00-12:00:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Briefly review key findings from pre-session input gathering Discuss as a group implications for the Garden's future Gather preliminary ideas re: future direction and vision <p><u>Session 2 (10/22) - 10:00-2:00:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workshop w/break out sessions re: vision for the Garden and what it will take to get there Break out groups share their ideas and large group discussion re: vision and priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow-up research, as needed Vet vision Flesh out plan components with committees, SP committee and staff (agree on what is critical in year 1 to work toward vision) Review draft plan with Board Refine and finalize plan
<p><u>Outcomes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared understanding of the Garden's context (how we are perceived externally, SWOT) Strategic ideas for the future 	<p><u>Outcomes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft future vision for the Garden Identified key priorities to get there and any outstanding questions 	<p><u>Outcomes:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completed strategic plan

Strategic Planning Committee:

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Harold Bailey ● Chris Coughlan ● Mick Hager ● Pam Meisner ● Jennifer Pillsbury ● Patrick Pilz | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Paul Redeker ● Jan Tubiolo ● DeAna Verbeke ● Janelle Wallace ● Ed Woodruff ● Richard Wright |
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The planning process included interviews with the following WCA representatives and external stakeholders:

WCA Representatives:

- Lynn Neault, Grossmont-Cuyamaca College District
- Dan McMillan & DeAna Verbeke, Helix Water District
- Steve Castaneda, Sweetwater Authority
- Mark Robak, Otay Water District
- Kathleen Hedberg, San Diego County Water Authority (and Helix)
- Lynn Neault, Grossmont Cuyamaca College District

External Stakeholders:

- American Public Gardens Association
- County Supervisor, Dianne Jacob's Office
- Union Bank
- Grossmont-Mt Helix Improvement Association (GMIA)
- RCP Block & Brick

- Kniffings Nursery
- St. Charles Catholic School (Principal)
- Teacher, Blossom Valley Elementary (Teacher)
- Master Gardeners Association

The plan and its execution would not be possible without the dedication of our entire Board, staff, docents, volunteers and partners. We are grateful for their support.