NATURE PARTNERS

Arboretum Welcomes Environmental Educators from Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia

By Tony Allison

“This is a wall for shelter we built out of cedar planks,” Sophio Sarkhanidze called out in lightly accented English to the group watching her. “As you see, the planks overlap downward on the outside so rain cannot penetrate the shelter.” Sophio, from the Republic of Georgia, and Ani Bayburdyan, from Armenia, had assembled the miniature cedar wall from a kit used in the Arboretum’s Native Plants and Peoples curriculum for schools. Kim Daniel, supervisor of UW Botanic Gardens’ youth education programs, had introduced the exercise. Now Kim was observing a group of six educators from overseas botanical gardens as they worked through several field activities that reflect the lives and traditional practices of Pacific Northwest Salish peoples.

Kim also showed the group the Arboretum’s children-friendly instructional materials and family education kits and walked them up Arboretum Drive to see the UW Botanic Gardens’
pioneering Fiddleheads Forest School program in action. Ani Bayburdyan later commented, “The idea of camps in the forest was a great one that I saw at the Arboretum.”

**Early Years of the Exchange Program**
The group was brought to the Arboretum by Partnerships for Nature (PN), a Bainbridge Island-based non-profit that carries out international environmental education exchanges between the Pacific Northwest and countries of the former Soviet Union. In 2010, in the first stage of the exchange, three young educators from Vladivostok Botanical Garden, in eastern Russia, came to the Seattle area. The following year, three U.S. educators—including then Arboretum education manager Patrick Mulligan—went to Vladivostok to lead training sessions and evaluate programs. Patrick later published an article about the trip in the journal of the American Public Gardens Association. By 2019, educators from eight gardens in Russia were participating, with one or two trips per year going in either direction.

The Arboretum hosted groups during each visit to Seattle. There were lively sessions with Arboretum educators and meetings with Arboretum Foundation staff about everything from volunteer activities (a novel concept for Russians to grasp) to event planning to fundraising strategies. And visiting groups staged evening presentations about their countries and gardens for Arboretum members and others at the Graham Visitors Center.

**Expansion, COVID, and a Long-Postponed Visit**
In 2018, botanical garden leaders in Ukraine and Georgia learned about the U.S.-Russia exchange at an international conference and asked if it was possible to expand it to their countries. In 2019, a small U.S. group went to Ukraine to lead workshops in three cities. Plans were laid for a visit by Ukrainian educators to Seattle in the spring of 2020, but then COVID abruptly halted
all exchange travel. Collaboration moved online, with seminars, meetings and round tables held separately with Ukrainian and Russian participants. By early 2022, with COVID waning, groups from both Russia and Ukraine were slated to come to Seattle. Then, the Russian invasion of Ukraine put an end to those plans and—at least for the foreseeable future—to the 12-year exchange program with Russia.

Finally, this past September two Ukrainian educators were able to come to Seattle, together with three educators from Georgia and one from Armenia. In addition to the Arboretum, they visited the Center for Urban Horticulture, the Burke Museum, Bellevue Botanical Garden, and other local centers of environmental education. Regarding her experience, Maria Nadraha (from Lviv University Botanical Garden) shared, “Participation in the program enriched me with new ideas and pushed me to think about creating different types of programs in our garden.” The visitors also had a chance to experience some iconic sites of natural beauty, hiking up Rattlesnake Ledge near North Bend and traveling to La Push on the coast.

Maria’s comment underlines the evolution of botanical gardens in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and other countries in that region. For many decades, their mission was largely devoted to science and research, and they were mostly closed to the public. More recently they have, like gardens in the U.S., turned increasingly to public engagement and outreach, becoming community centers of education, culture and conservation.

Building International Relationships

As part of this effort, in June of 2023, leaders from PN accompanied Andriy Prokopiv, Director of the Lviv University Botanical Garden in Ukraine, and Arsen Gasparyan, Director of the Yerevan Botanical Garden in Yerevan, Armenia, to the American Public Garden Association’s (APGA) Annual Conference in Texas. Andriy delivered a moving message of thanks to U.S. botanical gardens that had sent financial support to Ukrainian gardens during the ongoing war with Russia. That fundraising campaign was initiated by PN and spearheaded by Botanical Gardens Conservation International (BGCI). Ukrainian gardens had lost staff and funding because of the
Ukrainian botanical garden educators designing garden signage during a Partnerships for Nature workshop in Poland in October.

war and struggled to maintain their rich floral collections. At the same time, they were called upon to serve as oases of peace, recovery and respite for millions of internal refugees created by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. “This funding from U.S. botanical gardens has been extremely helpful in these circumstances,” Andriy asserted. “No less important, it has made us feel that we are not alone.”

Partnerships for Nature’s next project, following the APGA conference and the September visit of overseas educators to Seattle, was quite different but no less inspiring. In October, PN invited 20 Ukrainian botanical garden educators to Bolestraszyce Arboretum in southeast Poland, just 10 miles from Ukraine’s western border. They arrived by train from all parts of Ukraine, and the border crossing into Poland took extra time due to wartime conditions. After finally reaching their destination, the educators took part in an intensive four-day workshop on environmental education led by PN. The Polish Arboretum staff also participated. A key topic was the development of effective signage for garden visitors. The Ukrainians drew up mock signs and discussed them. They left with a small funding package from PN to put new signage in place by this spring. More importantly, they departed for home with a closer network of collaboration among themselves and their Polish and U.S. colleagues.

Sharing Experience and Knowledge

On the final night of their September 2023 visit to Seattle, the six educators delivered an online presentation, organized by the Arboretum Foundation, to an audience made up of Arboretum members, friends and staff. (Covid concerns precluded a live session.) The group showed slides of the natural beauty and environmental problems of their countries and outlined the critical role played by their botanical gardens in their communities. They also expressed gratitude for the kindness and stimulation experienced during their visit. When Maria Nadraha took the stage as the final speaker, her presentation grew deeply emotional. She showed slides of refugee children flooding botanical gardens, of physical damage to gardens caused by the war, and of new programs developed, with U.S. support, to aid refugee families and war veterans.

Audience comments were full of praise for the visitors and their presentations. One viewer wrote: “Thank you for sharing these environmental stewardship and educational programs in these beautiful regions of Ukraine, Georgia and Armenia. We are fortunate to share knowledge of botanical gardens together.” The session served as a capstone to the trip and showed that the rewards of such exchanges go beyond spreading objective knowledge and skills to building human empathy, collaboration and understanding across cultures and borders.

Tony Allison is the co-founder and board president of Partnerships for Nature. A long-time educator, he worked for many years at the Washington Park Arboretum and Mountains to Sound Greenway, in Seattle, where he developed curriculum and led classroom and field lessons for children.

More Information and Zoom Presentation

The mission of Partnerships for Nature is to build international relationships for the understanding and care of the natural world. To learn more or about how you can support their programs, visit their website at www.partnerships-for-nature.org or contact Tony Allison at anthonyallison@gmail.com.

To see a recording of the September 2023 online presentation, visit the Arboretum Foundation’s YouTube channel:youtu.be/B0cMTgWR_ZE