



Pennsylvania Public Horticulture Coalition

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President & CEO, Laurel Hill

Dear Chairs Pashinski and Daley, as well as members of the House Agriculture & Rural Affairs, and Tourism & Economic & Recreational Development Committees, thank you for attention to the internationally renowned work of Pennsylvania's public horticulture industry.

Today, I represent the Pennsylvania Public Horticulture Coalition (PPHC) as Co-Chair, and Laurel Hill as its President & CEO. Thank you for taking the time to hear from the collective voices and impact of Pennsylvania's public horticulture organizations that promote the connection between plants and people.

The Coalition currently has 20+ members throughout the state that first came together in the fall of 2020 with the common goal of creating opportunities for every Pennsylvanian to experience and benefit from organizations providing public horticulture experiences.

Our members maintain collections of plants for the public and are staffed by professionals trained in their given areas of expertise and maintain active plant records systems. Public horticulture entities include botanical gardens, arboreta, conservatories, cemeteries, zoological gardens, sculpture gardens, college and university campuses, historic homes, urban greening organizations, natural areas, and parks.

Pennsylvania is home to many of these public horticulture entities - and the benefits of this industry are vast.

First, public horticulture is a major driver of **tourism & recreation** throughout the commonwealth. Our members enjoy more than 4.2 million visitors annually, which is on par with professional sports league attendance. One-third of these visitors are from out-of-town, producing millions in visitor spending throughout our communities.

Next, many public horticulture entities prioritize **open green space & conservation**, providing Pennsylvania with thousands of acres of natural resources through conversation, restored forests, improved watersheds, and healthy private working lands. At some member sites, environmental remediation, utilizing plants and landscapes to address brownfields with contaminated soil and water, offers a broad community benefit.

Agriculture & food biodiversity, security, and fresh food access are also a focus of our industry. Together, Pennsylvania's public horticulture entities are vital to feeding our communities. Our members bring together diverse expertise, approaches, and solutions that are essential for biodiversity in food and agriculture. In addition, their natural landscapes are used for conserving food plants and their wild relatives.



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In addition, our members are essential drivers of **workforce & economic development**, with more than 2,000 full-time employees across our communities. Also, with a combined \$164 million operating budget, our members provide an overall \$500 million economic footprint in Pennsylvania.

Education, research & science is an often overlooked aspect of our industry. Our members are involved in research & development efforts that bring together academia, government, industry, and nonprofits to cultivate a healthy world through landscapes, gardens, and plants. Also, our members host year-round programs for interns, amateur, and professional horticulturists. Also, we host summer camps, school trips, and other public programs in coordination with various community organizations.

Finally, our members have a positive impact on personal **health & well-being**. Studies have shown that connecting people to plants and the outdoors boosts well-being by providing many physical, emotional, and social benefits.

Today, you heard from PPHC members and partners that provide context for the many public horticultural benefits that we enjoy throughout the commonwealth.

Turning to my background, I am honored to be the President & CEO at Laurel Hill – two privately owned, publicly accessible, nationally noteworthy cemeteries that are free and open 365 days a year. At 78 acres, Laurel Hill East, in Philadelphia, was established in 1836 and was the first cemetery in the United States to be designated as a National Historic Landmark. A 10-minute drive across the Schuylkill River, Laurel Hill West, founded in 1869, is 187 acres in Montgomery County and is on the National Register of Historic Places. Together, they constitute a 265-acre nationally accredited arboretum.

Many of you may be asking yourselves: “How does a cemetery relate to public gardens, horticulture, and tourism-centered economic enhancement?”

In the early 1800s, cities like Boston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia were industrializing. They were dirty, dense, and generally incubators for disease and contamination. The word “cemetery” wasn’t yet part of the American lexicon. People buried their dead in crowded church graveyards or in potters’ fields.

Borrowing from Europe, there began a movement to establish more respectable and more beautiful burial grounds, removed from the city. Decades before Central Park, these “rural” cemeteries, with rolling hills, sculpted monuments, superb architecture, and exquisite gardens became the first public parks in America.

Laurel Hill is still an active burial site and is home to nearly 200,000 “permanent residents” – but we are so much more. We are a certified level II arboretum. We have 6 PA State Champion Trees and an impressive collection of over 6,000 trees and shrubs representing more than 700 distinct species and cultivars.



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Committed to sustainability, we are on the Lower Merion pollinator pathway, we are creating a wildflower meadow along the steep slopes of Laurel Hill East, and we are the only cemetery in the world to receive SITES Gold certification for our green burial area.

We also welcome passive recreation in our cemeteries. Between 2019 and 2020 the number of daily visitors skyrocketed by 66%, as people found Laurel Hill to be a safe and attractive alternative to crowded park trails. Over the last five years, Laurel Hill has held 548 events and welcomed more than 45,000 guests to our outdoor movies, theater performances, concerts, tours, lectures, and markets.

Our cemeteries also serve as an economic driver for the film industry. Perhaps the most well-known films made in our cemetery are Rocky Balboa (2006) as well as Creed I and II. In fact, Adrian Balboa and Paulie Pennino from the movies are “buried” at Laurel Hill. They are on the itinerary of several Rocky Tour Experiences that visitors can take through Philadelphia.

Aside from the recreational and historical allure of Laurel Hill, we play an active role in education and workforce development. We are often the subject or location of study among students of all ages. In just the past 4 years, we have hosted architecture students from Jefferson University and preservation students from Penn. We’ve worked with museum studies students from the University of the Arts, and future artists from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. We’ve been included in biodiversity studies and arts & entertainment projects by Drexel University students. We’ve hosted interns from Moore College of Art & Design as well as Williamson College of the Trades.

Finally, our landscape staff and the staff members at other public gardens throughout the state are always collaborating and learning from each other, sharing research, best practices, and even plants.

As you can see, our industry provides dynamic benefits across the commonwealth. Continued investment in public horticulture, whether through open-space projects or opportunities like the Center for Plant Excellence, will enrich our communities in so many ways. We look forward to working with the Committees to find innovative solutions and opportunities for every Pennsylvanian to experience and benefit from public horticulture.

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