



## BARTRAM'S GARDEN

**Testimony to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives  
Agriculture and Tourism Committees  
Re: Public Horticulture in Pennsylvania**

Submitted by Maitreyi Roy, Executive Director, Bartram's Garden  
*March 7, 2024*

Located just a few blocks from the gleaming campuses of University City, the neighborhood of Southwest Philadelphia is one of the poorest, most industrialized, and most structurally violent areas in America's poorest big city.<sup>1</sup> This neighborhood is predominately Black or African-American (80.3%), with roughly 65,000 residents. Southwest Philadelphia has long been one of the most under-resourced parts of Philadelphia, with higher than the city's average rates of poverty, trauma, chronic illness, and environmental degradation, even before the devastation wrought by the coronavirus pandemic. Per the 2022 American Community Survey, the area is poorer than the city average, with more than one-quarter of residents living below the poverty line, including 34% of children. Only 28.8% of residents have a bachelor's degree, and the median annual household income is just \$41,764. In Bartram Village, one of the city's largest public housing complexes, the median annual household income is less than \$10,000. Census data reveals that 32.2% of residents receive public food or income assistance, including 65.6% of families with children.

Southwest Philadelphia's challenges extend to significant environmental and health inequities. The neighborhoods reflect what Detroit educator Malik Yakini describes as "food apartheid," where "public policy and economic practices have created [this area with] low access to foods." Census data reveals that 32.2% of neighbors receive public food or income assistance, including 65.6% of families with children. The neighborhood is also an urban heat island with between 0% and 8% tree coverage—a stark contrast to the city's current average of 20%. Outdoor recreational access is limited, as many caregivers report concerns about having children play outside near the neighborhood's many vacant lots and more than 100 abandoned industrial sites. In addition to the long-term and chronic impacts of environmental injustice, these challenges translate readily into gun violence: according to the City of Philadelphia Controller's Office, in 2021 alone, Kingsessing suffered the city's fourth-highest rate of gun violence—and second-highest for victims under the age of 18.

But this area also has an unparalleled legacy of horticulture and connection to the land: Bartram's Garden, America's oldest surviving botanical garden, was founded here in 1728 by John Bartram, an acclaimed early botanist. During Bartram's time and until the industrial era, West and Southwest Philadelphia represented the city's countryside and farmland. Today, Bartram's Garden is a 50-acre riverfront public park and National Historic Landmark welcoming more than 100,000 visitors annually

---

<sup>1</sup> Per Bandy X. Lee's *Violence: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences, and Cures*, "Structural violence refers to a form of violence wherein social structures or social institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs. Although less visible, it is by far the most lethal form of violence, through causing excess deaths—deaths that would not occur in more equal societies." The term was coined by sociologist Johan Galtung in "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research."

A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK HOUSE & GARDEN

John Bartram Association, 54<sup>th</sup> St. & Lindbergh Blvd., Philadelphia, PA 19143 T: (215) 729.5281 F: (215) 729.1047

BARTRAMSGARDEN.ORG

through the stewardship of the non-profit John Bartram Association (JBA), which has maintained the site in partnership with the City of Philadelphia since 1893. Our mission is to create equitable relationships among people and nature through immersive, community-driven experiences that activate the Bartram legacy, Garden, and House, on land and on the Schuylkill River, in Southwest Philadelphia.

With a reclaimed meadow, community farm, ecologically significant natural tidal wetlands, and the neighborhood's only safe river access, we offer year-round free and low-cost programming focused on building equitable relationships among people and nature. As a free public park, we particularly seek to welcome, serve, and champion our nearest neighbors in Southwest Philadelphia, where safe public green spaces are limited. A recent visitation study revealed that our visitors' racial and ethnic demographics echo those of Philadelphia as a whole, with roughly two-thirds of visitors identifying as people of color.

Bartram's Garden also works closely with local residents to determine priorities, set goals, and share resources and decision-making. In 2018, with support from the William Penn Foundation, Bartram's Garden convened the Southwest Philadelphia Community Leadership Team (SWLT), a stipended group of local leaders including local small business owners, neighborhood leadership like block captains and ward members, parents and teachers, clergy and non-profit executives, and more. In 2018 and 2019, the SWLT led a community visioning effort to guide the Garden's campus planning and site investments, gathering input from more than 300 local residents through public meetings, mobile-friendly surveys, and door-to-door canvassing. The pandemic proved no interruption to the SWLT's ongoing work, and they have continued to meet monthly to advise the Garden and, increasingly, other city institutions on key neighborhood priorities.

With guidance from our neighbors, and thanks to continued advocacy from our elected officials, we see every day that public green spaces like Bartram's Garden can offer powerful opportunities to improve community health through recreation and environmental restoration, attract tourism, employ and inspire a new generation of workers, and create opportunities for community-building through connection, shared stewardship, and cultural exchange. Some of our key activities include the following:

- **Climate resilience and community greening** through neighborhood tree planting, support for community food sovereignty, water quality monitoring, and initial planning efforts to ensure the long-term resilience and ecosystems health not only of the park but of our wider Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood amidst a changing climate.
- **Paid youth workforce development** employing up to 50 high school students and young adults annually, primarily from our Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood, focused on skill-building in fields like urban agriculture, watershed management, arboriculture, and ecosystems management as well as on readiness for college and careers.
- **Neighborhood culture and wellness** through a range of year-round, free, community-driven activities inviting local residents to connect to nature and each other with everything from herbalism workshops to family movie nights, learn-to-bike classes to river recreation like weekly fishing and boating.

We are grateful to have received Commonwealth support for the Garden's ongoing programming as well as for the care and improvement of this thriving National Historic Landmark through recent grant funding from the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Environmental Protection, RACP, the

Department of Commerce and Economic Development, the Fish and Boat Commission, the Historical and Museum Commission, and the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

We believe firmly that the Commonwealth should continue investing in public green space as a major contributor to the public good, and we are excited for the opportunities made possible by the Center for Plant Excellence as the state continues to invest not only in farmers but also in the educators, collaborators, and conservators who connect every community to their natural resources. We urge the Committees to continue strengthening the state's capacity to support the families, youth interns, neighbors, and international tourists who find inspiration, wellness, and a connection with nature every day at Bartram's Garden.

Thank you for your consideration and your ongoing support of our Southwest Philadelphia community.