

Dear Friend,

Throughout each season, The Friends have strived to connect more people with plants and nature through our work at the Oak Park Conservatory. In springtime, we enjoy the cheery daffodils popping up along Garfield Street, a chance to learn from experts during the Learn and Grow Lectures, and the annual Plant Sale, where hundreds of plants are started from seed right in our greenhouses. Families stream in to experience the interactive KidsFest nature education community event.

During the summer months, the music and sounds of laughter and conversation spill from the Rubinstein Garden during Uncorked. Toddlers and friends splash in the water and engage in Discovery Garden Exploration Time and the native plants fill in the gardens and attract pollinators.

As the seasons change, the hay bales, corn stalks, and pumpkins are on display in the gardens, and we welcome hundreds of visitors for Fall Fest. Families enjoy Toddler Exploration Time and we get in the spirit of Halloween throughout the showrooms. We welcome neighbors to the Plant and Tool Exchange and school groups for docent-led tours.

When wintertime comes, young learners enjoy Story Time with songs and puppets while homeowners shop the festive Winter Greens Market. The steam of the Mediterranean Room takes the chill off and our Seed Starting lecture and Seed Swap attracts gardeners who are anxious to plan their gardens.

These programs are only possible with our dedicated volunteers behind the scenes planning for months at a time. Our 150+ volunteers bring their best to help us create enticing, engaging programs tailored to the wide community base.

Our Strategic Action Plan focuses on casting the net wider to attract participation from communities surrounding Oak Park. We want to invite neighbors who have never been to the Conservatory to experience it firsthand. We have plans in place to do just that. We are also working on ways to enhance your experience when you visit the Conservatory.

We have a lot to look forward to in the coming year and are grateful for your support in achieving our goals.

Sincerely,

Sue Boyer President

Judy Klem Executive Director





FRIENDS PURPOSE, VISION & VALUES





Purpose

Our purpose is to deepen and enrich the visitor experience for diverse populations at the Oak Park Conservatory.



Vision Statement

Our vision is to connect people with nature and horticulture through the Oak Park Conservatory for personal enrichment and to inspire environmental stewardship.





Values

- COMMUNITY We build community. We welcome all visitors as guests and treat them with respect. We strive to include a diverse range of backgrounds in our educational and recreational events and programming. We strive to build relationships with other related community groups.
- EDUCATION We provide tools and guide participants to learn through exploration and discovery. We strive to craft memorable experiences through education and interpretive programs.
- VOLUNTEERISM We value volunteerism and people. We strive to be a premier volunteer organization in our community. Our volunteers make a difference in the world. We are committed to shaping a better future through positive educational experiences with nature.
- RESOURCES We strive for sustainable means and methods in all aspects of our organization. Through fiscal accountability and sharing research-based information with visitors, we maximize our limited resources to use them wisely and responsibly.





Initiative #1: Broaden & Develop Program Strategy

Initiative #2: Improve Volunteer Program

Initiative #3: Develop a Plan for Fiscal Resilience

Initiative #4: Strengthen Relationship with the Oak Park Conservatory

In March of 2023, FOPCON hosted our first member field trip. Thirteen members gathered at the Garfield Conservatory for the Conservatory's stunning Spring Flower Show: "Bee's Knees." One of our goals was to help members learn about the reciprocity benefits of FOPCON membership. Those who attended really enjoyed the flower show and learning about bees and their impact on the world.

At our Annual Meeting in June 2023, Board President, Sue Boyer, highlighted the past year's successes and thanked outgoing Board members for their contributions. Dr. Ken Boyer, a regular volunteer in the Desert Room, gave a lecture on how to care for and propagate succulents. Afterwards, members enjoyed a hands-on activity in the Rubinstein Garden where they planted succulents to take home. Some of the plants were propagated from plants in the Desert Room. Dr. Ken Boyer and Dusan Lepojevic, Conservatory

Greenhouse Supervisor, answered questions about the care of their plants and how to propagate succulents at home.

Our goal is to raise awareness of FOPCON's many member benefits and offer new incentives to join/renew membership in The Friends. During our 2023 membership drive, one of the incentives was an entry into a raffle for gift cards from local business partners Good Earth, McAdam Garden Center, and Westgate Florist. We encourage all members to patronize these local businesses and receive a 10 percent discount.

FOPCON's membership total in FY 2023 was 601. Our 2024 Membership Drive runs until March 31. Help us spread the word!

-- by Ramona Ramos, Membership Co-Chair





Membership Benefits

- FREE Admission and/or reciprocal privileges to over 345 Gardens, Arboreta and Conservatories nationwide
- Members-Only early shopping at the Annual Plant Sale
- Discounted tickets to Uncorked
- Discounted tickets to the Garden Walk

- FREE Gardening Lectures
- Invitation to FOPCON's Annual Member Meeting and reception
- 10% Discount at local partners: Clover's Garden Center, Good Earth Greenhouse, McAdam Garden Center, and Westgate Flowers



Plant Sale Continues to Inspire Love of Gardening!

The 34th Annual Plant Sale took place in May 2023. This favorite fundraiser event is made possible by the generous support of countless dedicated volunteers working in greenhouses under the direction of the Conservatory staff.

The project begins in late summer when plant selections are made and seed and plant starter orders are placed with the best growers in the business. The seeds arrive in December and the tiny starter plants arrive in March. This is when the work and the fun begins. Teams of volunteers are scheduled four days a week to work in the greenhouses. This year's selections offer many of the true favorites with several new beautiful ornamentals available. The Conservatory truly comes to life these months with the anticipation of the beautiful plants we grow for our community.

In 2024, we are introducing the Kitchen Minis Collection of three naturally compact vegetable plants. One tomato, one pepper, and one cucumber are suitable for sunny windows or countertops as well as outside on a patio table.

35th Annual Plant Sale Dates To Save

March 30: Website Opens - Member Online Sale Begins

April 14: Public Online Sale Begins

April 28: Online Sale Closes

May 7-9: Rehm Pool Parking Lot Pickup

-- by Mary Ellen Murphy, FOPCON Plant Sale Co-Chair



Garden Walk 2023 Draws Record Attendance

The 29th Annual Oak Park and River Forest Garden Walk took place June 25, 2023. More than 850 participants toured eight private gardens and the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church community garden. The Garden Walk featured a carefully selected array of gardens, including an organic fruit and vegetable garden, a Japanese-style garden, and a shade garden whose owner shared the home's fascinating history.

The Garden Walk, a long-standing tradition in our community, is a collaboration between FOPCON and the Garden Club of Oak Park and River Forest. Each summer, the OPRF Garden Walk Committee starts work on the next year's lineup of gardens. Committee members

visit homeowners in Oak Park and River Forest who are willing to share their gardens with the community. The Garden Walk's success is due to the generosity of the garden owners who share their gardens and the tireless work of volunteers from FOPCON and the Garden Club. This year's Garden Walk raised almost \$15,000. FOPCON and the Garden Club share the proceeds from this fundraiser. The Garden Club's proceeds benefit scholarships and community projects and FOPCON's proceeds support projects that benefit the Oak Park Conservatory's mission.

-- by Kathy FioRito

FOPCON EVENTS FRIEND OAK PA

Uncorked Fosters Community Spirit

The Friends' popular Uncorked Friday night summer series started in June 2023 with perfect weather to enjoy drinks and music and meet new and old friends in the Rubinstein Garden. July was not so kind due to heat and humidity, but the August and September Uncorked events were lovely.

In addition to good conversation, food, drinks and music, participants enjoyed tours of the Conservatory showrooms. We held drawings at each event for bottles of wine and a variety of gift cards and/or themed gifts, including Summer/Beach, Travel, Staycation and Night Out in Oak Park. The monies raised help us to carry out our mission and programs.

Our Uncorked events drew over 425 attendees in 2023. We are grateful for the continued support of our local merchants, including Famous Liquors, Empanadus, Happy Apple Pie Shop, Betty's Pizza, and Angie's Pantry. Local artisans from Olive and Well, Einnim (soaps and candles), Stern Glass Works and Bead

in Hand (jewelry) displayed their goods. Music was provided by Tim Coan, Szurko Trio, James Robinson Paran and Andy Pratt.

To evaluate Uncorked, we sent a survey to three groups of people: the participants, artisans and volunteers. The results helped to plan for the coming year. One of the changes is that drawing tickets will be six for \$20.00. Another is that a couple of new musicians will be performing. We are grateful for your continued support and look forward seeing everyone at the 2024 Uncorked Friday sessions: June 28, July 26, August 23 and September 27.

Uncorked tickets are \$20 for the general public. Remember, FOPCON members can purchase tickets at a 10% discount! Become a member today to take advantage of this and the many other benefits.

-- by Carol Einhorn, Uncorked



EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Education Programs Expand Reach

The Friends education programs have great potential to impact lives in many different ways. From free early childhood programs to school tours, diverse learner tours, adult gardening lectures and special events for families, we offer lifelong learning opportunities for everyone. Our work is only possible with the generous support of our members, volunteers and donors.



Docent-Led Tours

In FY 2023, we hosted nearly 1,180 tour participants—an increase of 23 percent over last year. Our tours, led by trained docents who are FOPCON volunteers, feature the Conservatory's four distinct ecosystems, with a focus on environmental sustainability. The tours are offered for adults and children and can be tailored to each group's needs.

Our school tours are aligned with the Illinois State Standards for Science. Students travel through each habitat, learning about different soils, the structure of plants, and much more. In FY 2023, we hosted 56 school tours, an increase of 78 percent over the previous year.

We responded to the increased demand for tours by refreshing our training, recruiting more docents, and expanding our tour program to Sundays. Docents are now present on Sunday afternoons in the showrooms to answer questions and enhance our visitors' experience.

We continue to welcome students from surrounding communities as part of our Tour Grant Program. This grant is for underserved students in schools that do not have the funds for a docent-led tour. We also offer school tours in Spanish.

We offer a Diverse Learners Tour, an interactive and sensory-driven learning experience designed for individuals 18 and older with special needs, such as delayed development, learning disabilities, and special education. This plant-focused tour uses visual prompting to introduce scientific concepts and invites active participation through multi-sensory, hands-on learning techniques.

-- by Kathie Walsh

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS



Adult Education

In fiscal year 2023 FOPCON was fortunate to host local, state, and even a nationwide expert to present a number of free lectures. These knowledgeable and entertaining speakers provided hundreds of registrants with information on topics ranging from growing chili peppers and hydrangeas to small space gardening and companion planting. Our in-person lecture on seed starting was a perfect introduction to FOPCON's first-ever and highly successful seed swap that followed. The topics covered in our Learn and Grow series in April paved the way for gardeners to become even more enthused for the annual FOPCON plant sale in May.

-- by Susie Narkis, Adult Education Chair



KidsFest

In April 2023, FOPON hosted our ever popular annual family event, KidsFest. A total of 290 guests enjoyed the theme, "Life Under a Log," that included amphibians and reptiles of the Chicago Wilderness region. Families were invited to see these animals live and up close. Our showcase, The Frog Lady, entailed an interactive presentation about salamanders, toads and turtles and their relationship with rotting wood. Children also learned about more native Illinois wildlife and habitat from our partners from the University of Illinois Master Naturalists, The Field Museum, and the Oak Park Public Library. Finally, KidsFest is always a space to celebrate the birthday of George, our beloved and departed yellow-headed amazon parrot. Families found George, and a life sized version of him, socializing with the crowd. This event was free and we welcomed close to 300 guests from Oak Park and surrounding communities between 9:00 and 11:30 am.

> -- by Wendy Negron and Sundeepa Kaur, KidsFest co-chairs

Early Childhood Education

Participation and enthusiasm remained strong for our September through May Toddler Exploration Time (TET) program and our summer Discovery Garden Exploration Time (DGET) program. Our TET program attracted 306 participants in FY 2023, and our DGET program drew 515 participants.

This year, we added a bilingual English-Spanish Story Time on the first Wednesday of the month.

Families continue to borrow exploration backpacks. We added questions to engage children with plants in each of the gardens and highlight seasonal changes.

This year's highlight was our participation in the Migrating Monarchs celebration in September at Trailside Museum in River Forest. We created and installed a story trail and shared information about the Friends during the event.

-- by Barb Pagniucci, Early Childhood Education Chair



Volunteer Committee Report

The goal of the Volunteer Committee is to support the work of the Volunteer Coordinator and to recognize the efforts of FOPCON volunteers. The Volunteer Committee was busy in 2023 hosting two events for volunteers. In May, more than 40 plant sale volunteers joined in a celebration at the home of Board President Sue Boyer. In September, the Committee hosted its annual Volunteer Recognition Event at the Cheney Mansion. Seventy volunteers and guests enjoyed an evening of refreshments and recognition. Special recognition awards were presented to Mary Ann Jurgus and Kathie Walsh.





With **Gratitude**

Our volunteers are the backbone of each and every event and program at The Friends. We could not do this without their hard work and are forever thankful for the time they have given us.

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FOPCON VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT

Volunteer Spotlight: Yolanda Ruiz

In the late 1950's under the Bracero program, Yolanda Ruiz's father migrated to the U.S. from Mexico due to a labor shortage during the Korean War. Yolanda grew up on the south side of Chicago, where the neighborhood was, and still is, heavily segregated. Determined to raise

her daughter in a diverse community, she moved to Oak Park around the time her daughter turned three years old. "It was the best decision! We still both live here and appreciate this community," she said.

As a new retiree in 2022, Yolanda was looking for meaningful volunteer work and a sense of community. Unbeknownst to others, she was experiencing depression when she started volunteering with FOPCON. Yolanda soon found great joy in reading to young children during Story Time. She says that interacting with the children, caregivers

and parents changed her life. She also cherishes the relationships she has cultivated with the staff, visitors and volunteers.

Yolanda enjoys giving tours during the holidays. She attributes her sense of belonging and healing to

volunteering, and she sees her volunteering as giving back. "I'm so blessed to live in this country and grateful to my parents and their sacrifice," she said.

One of the ways she sees the community evolving is by offering Bilingual Story Time, exposing children to

other cultures. This, Yolanda believes, reduces ignorance and diminishes the negative impact of racism. Recently, she started teaching Spanish to toddlers. She says her creative side is always being stretched to keep the kids engaged.

The best advice she has ever received is, "Cherish the present moment and live! This moment is all that you really have."

When asked what dreams or goals she still wishes to accomplish, she says, "I'd like to make a positive impact in my world starting with community." Since Yolanda began volunteering with

FOPCON in 2022, she continues to inspire by donating her time, and talents. Thank you, Yolanda! Say hello when you see her on your next visit to the Oak Park Conservatory!

-- by Claire Ong





Sustaining the Conservatory for the Next Generation

A planned gift to the Friends of the Oak Park Conservatory in your will, trust, retirement plan, or IRA helps ensure The Friends' continued support of the Oak Park Conservatory. Sustaining The Friends with a planned gift supports our mission to provide education programs for all ages and backgrounds and

rewarding volunteer opportunities for future generations.

We invite you to join fellow donors in the Legacy Society and make the generous decision to include the Friends of the Oak Park Conservatory in your estate plans. Please let us know of your plans so that we can include you in Legacy Society programs. For more information, please contact director@fopcon.org.





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We are grateful to the following donors who donated January 1, 2023 to January 31, 2024. Thank you for your generosity!

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FINANCIAL REPORTS FOR FISCAL YEAR: OCTOBER 1, 2022 TO SEPTEMBER 30, 2023













































































