



# Museum Profile

## **WOODLANDS GARDEN**

DEKALB COUNTY, GEORGIA

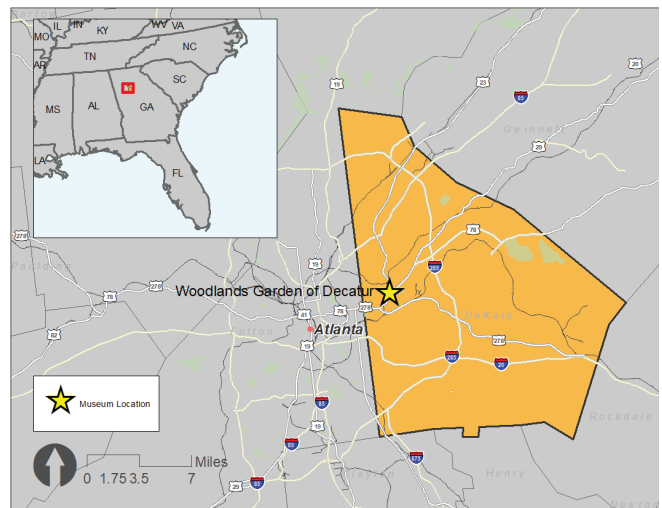
# Museum Profile: Woodlands Garden



## DEKALB COUNTY, GEORGIA

Woodlands Garden (“Woodlands” or “the Garden”) is located in DeKalb County, Georgia. The Garden sits at the intersection of two busy roads in Decatur, a suburban community outside of Atlanta, Georgia. The site comprises an eight-acre forest preserve with indigenous plants and trees. Woodlands Garden was founded in 2002 as a bequest from the Morse family, who originally created, curated, and lived on the wooded estate. They arranged to have it permanently protected from development so that future generations could experience and enjoy the grounds. Since then, the family and community have worked together to steward a unique collection of native plants and trees on the property. It was operated by a single full-time employee at the time of the site visit.

The Garden’s support for wellbeing in the city of Decatur and DeKalb County is enshrined in the organization’s mission statement: “preserving a woodland garden as an *urban sanctuary* to



educate and engage the community in the natural world” (emphasis added). The Garden contributes to social wellbeing by providing a tranquil space, educational opportunities for children, and opportunities for community engagement.

## DEKALB COUNTY

DeKalb County is part of the broader Atlanta metro region, home to just more than 720,000 residents, with a population that has grown by nearly 9 percent since 2000. With three subway stations connecting it to downtown Atlanta, a bustling Main Street with boutiques and restaurants, and well-respected public schools, Decatur is a desirable suburb for families in

the Atlanta region. Median incomes in Decatur were \$92,263 compared with \$52,623 in the rest of DeKalb County. Just more than half of the county's residents are Black (53.6 percent). While the city of Decatur is wealthy, the county is not, with just more than 14 percent of families in poverty, compared to 11 percent of families nationwide.

	Population	% Change in Population (2000–2016)	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% Asian	% Other	Median Household Income	% Families in Poverty
United States	318,558,162	13.2	62.0	12.3	17.3	5.2	3.3	\$55,322	11.0
DeKalb County	723,902	8.7	29.2	53.6	8.7	5.9	2.5	\$52,623	14.4

Compared to other suburban counties across the country, DeKalb County residents enjoy elevated levels of overall community health, while the overall K–12 educational systems in DeKalb County experiences high needs, reflected in students' performance across a range of publicly available measures of success. DeKalb

County fell in the top quartile on the Community Health Index and in the bottom quartile of the School Effectiveness Index.<sup>1</sup> Health Care & Social Assistance and Retail Trade are the two largest employment sectors in the county, employing 14 and 12 percent of workers, respectively.

	Total Labor Force	% Health Care & Social Assistance	% Education Services	% Retail Trade	% Accommodation & Food Service
United States*	131,362,978	14.5	9.2	10.9	8.9
DeKalb County	290,269	14.0	12.0	12.0	8.0

Data Sources: 2012–16 American Community Survey five-year estimates; U.S. Census Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD), 2017.

\*Continental figures for total labor force include the 48 lower states and Washington, DC.

<sup>1</sup> Data elements included in the Community Health and School Effectiveness Indexes, along with measures for DeKalb County, can be found at the beginning of Appendix II.

## SITE VISIT PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION

In fall 2019, the study team conducted interviews with one staff member, two board members, and representatives from six different partner organizations. Site visit interviews conducted with staff and partners focused on understanding the Garden's programming and partnerships that support education and health in DeKalb County as well as its institutional approaches to assessment and sustainability.

In addition, the following data were used to create the network map included in this profile:

- Woodlands Garden 2018 Form 990
- Program evaluations for several Woodlands Garden of Decatur programs
- Interview notes and related materials collected by the case study team

This site profile includes the following:

- A summary of select Woodlands Garden programs and partnerships that support formal and informal education and the overall educational capacity of the broader community
- A descriptive network map that illustrates the scope and variety of connections the Garden maintains with local partners throughout the county and beyond

## WOODLANDS GARDEN PROVIDES A RESOURCE THAT NURTURES SOCIAL WELLBEING<sup>2</sup>

The Garden conceptualizes its role in the community as supporting wellbeing by providing a resource for others to use, rather than as an active agent of change. In the words of one stakeholder, the Garden seeks "passive engagement." Individuals and groups use the setting of Woodlands Garden for their own activities, rather than rely on the Garden to plan and program something for them. The Garden does not charge admission or limit daytime access to the grounds, and the individuals who use the site do so at their own initiative. For those who take advantage of the Garden's tranquil environment, access is a free and valued resource.

This orientation is partly a practical outcome of the Garden's limited capacity, but the orientation is also structural. Woodlands Garden is intended to be a tranquil and restful space. Interviewees report that activating the space through daily activities and events would change how the Garden could contribute to wellbeing and perhaps diminish the tranquility of the space.

This approach to promoting social wellbeing requires that the Garden be accessible and welcoming to populations that can benefit from its resources. Decatur residents with developmental disabilities are one group that Woodlands Garden has focused on serving. Developmentally disabled individuals already participate in many of the Garden's annual activities, and those with sensory sensitivities find the Garden to be a therapeutic environment.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the site visit, the Garden was closed for renovations intended to expand the size of the preserve and greatly enhance the space's visibility and accessibility. These included building an on-site parking lot, renovating the Visitor Center, and improving Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility.

One of the ways that Woodlands Garden is working to ensure greater accessibility for people with developmental disabilities in the future is by partnering with an area chapter of a nonprofit, L'Arche Atlanta, that provides semiautonomous housing to individuals with disabilities. As part of its recent expansion, the Garden acquired an

eight-bedroom home on an adjacent parcel of land. The Garden sold the property to L'Arche, which is working to renovate the property. The house will be owned and managed by L'Arche, allowing residents permanent and easy access to Woodlands Garden.

## **PROVIDING AN URBAN SANCTUARY OFFERS AN ESCAPE FROM THE STRESSORS OF MODERN LIFE**

While not always directly connected to pedagogy, activities at the Garden support social wellbeing and mental health among residents. The Garden was created to provide a beautiful respite from modern suburban life. Stakeholders emphasized repeatedly the mental health benefits of being in nature and the importance (and scarcity) of quiet tranquility in the modern world.

Although the city of Decatur is small, the city is one of the densest in the region with 5,156 people per mile, compared with only 3,494 people per mile in Atlanta. The city's rapid population growth over the last decade has put open, undeveloped land at a major premium. Although the Garden's grounds are not large, they offer green space for residents in an urban setting

For students at a nearby elementary school, the Garden is the closest space where students can experience nature and an important educational resource, supporting activities related to the state's science learning standards.

The Garden also provides peaceful sanctuary for nearby residents in the adjacent condominiums and a retirement home that flank the site. Likewise, in the summer, the campers at the local YMCA, which is located only two blocks away, take advantage of the cooling shade for safe outdoor activities.

## **WOODLANDS GARDEN PROVIDES AN EDUCATIONAL SITE FOR A DIVERSE RANGE OF COMMUNITY MEMBERS**

Since its inception, the Garden's board has had a strong education subcommittee that has worked to find ways for the Garden to be an educational resource for the community. While the Garden does not have enough staff to run its own educational programs, it has created ways for others to leverage its space to further an educational mission.

For the last eight years, for example, every fourth grader in the Decatur Public School District has come to Woodlands Garden for a class field trip. The program was created by one of the Garden's

board members, who works as a teacher in the local high school. She noticed that elementary school teachers were required to do a hands-on science activity with their fourth graders to understand the "web of life" of interconnected organisms in nature but that many teachers did not feel comfortable designing their own lesson on the subject. The education committee at the Garden worked for a year and a half to develop a set of activities that would meet the state's curricular requirements and could be completed on the grounds.

Building on this work, the Garden's education subcommittee has continued to work to create a set of garden lesson plans that align with the state of Georgia's educational standards. The plans, which are designed for different grade

levels and subjects, provide worksheets and templates that allow teachers who may not be experts in horticulture to easily plan and execute an educational field trip to the Garden.

## **THE GARDEN IS A PLACE FOR LEARNING, MAKING CONNECTIONS, AND ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY**

Interviewees also cited the Garden's role as an important platform for individuals to give back to their community. Every Wednesday, for example, a group of dedicated volunteers meets to help maintain the Garden. Many in the group have been working at the Garden since it opened and have a connection to the original family that owned the land. For some, participation is a social activity that promotes their wellbeing through developing closer social ties. Many of the gardeners are retired, and this is a way to meet and engage with friends. For others, participation is more transactional: The Garden is a designated Master Gardener site, where individuals working toward their Master Gardener certification from the University of Georgia can get the 40 certified hours they need to graduate.

The Garden also hosts volunteer groups from local universities, Eagle Scouts, and businesses, who complete gardening and landscaping projects on-site. While the Garden itself benefits from these activities, the volunteers also benefit through the camaraderie they build and the new skills they gain during gardening and landscaping projects. The Garden acknowledges this important role it plays in fostering a sense of wellbeing and connection in the community. In the words of one of the Garden's board members, "Wellbeing is also about being around like-minded people who want to be in nature, stewarding nature. Wellbeing for some is also knowing that you've helped make this happen."

The Garden's largest event of the year, Fairies in the Garden, also represents its focus on urban education and engagement with the intent of contributing to social wellbeing. The event is held for children and families in the community in partnership with the Skyland Trails clinic, a local residential psychiatric clinic and nonprofit mental health treatment organization. For the last nine years, the clinic's art therapy patients have worked together to create fairy doors and fairy homes that are installed throughout the Garden. Children and families come to the Garden to find the fairy homes and participate in arts and crafts, managed by volunteers from the local YMCA. The event is free and extremely popular with the local community: In the past year, the event attracted 750 individuals in a two-and-a-half-hour period.

This event exemplifies the ways in which the Garden seeks to contribute to social wellbeing. Interviews mentioned that for individuals with sensory sensitivities and developmental disabilities, the event is a highlight of the year. For campers at the local YMCA, the event is an educational experience and an opportunity to demonstrate leadership skills through planning and staffing arts and craft activities. For the participants in Skyland Trails' therapy programs, the event is an opportunity for patients in the organization's expressive therapies program to share their work and give back to their community.<sup>3</sup> The event also illustrates the role of the Garden as a host. Although the event is held in Woodlands Garden, the Garden's staff play more of a facilitator rather than manager role. Community volunteers provide most of the

<sup>3</sup> In addition to art and music therapy, Skyland Trails offers horticultural therapy as a way to help patients heal and practice mindfulness while expressing their creativity.

support that powers the event: the Skyland Trails patients who create and install the fairy doors and the YMCA campers who coordinate and staff activity tables.

Woodlands Garden has stayed true to the original vision of the Morse family, who donated their property to create a resource that would serve

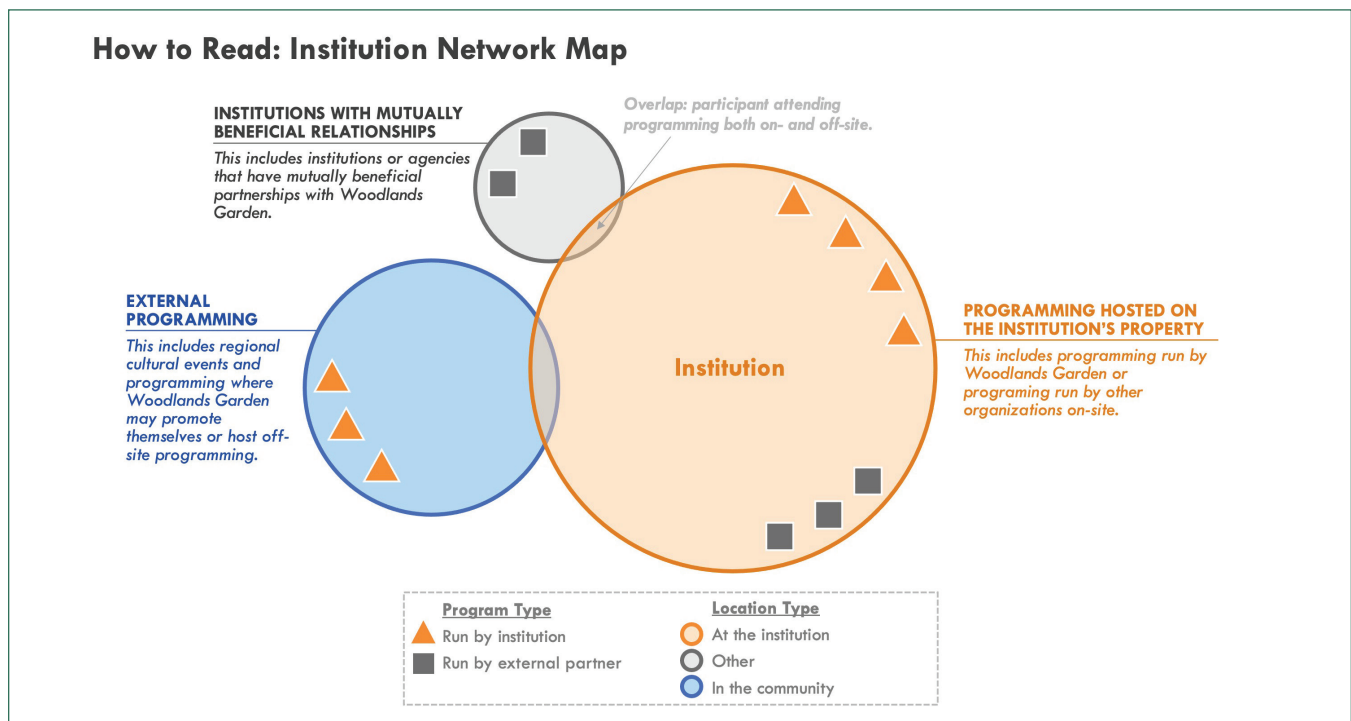
the community and showcase the plants and trees native to the north Georgian piedmont. Their vision of a peaceful space, preserved from development, continues to guide the Garden’s mission and informs the activities and partnerships the Garden uses to support social wellbeing.

## WOODLANDS GARDEN NETWORK MAP

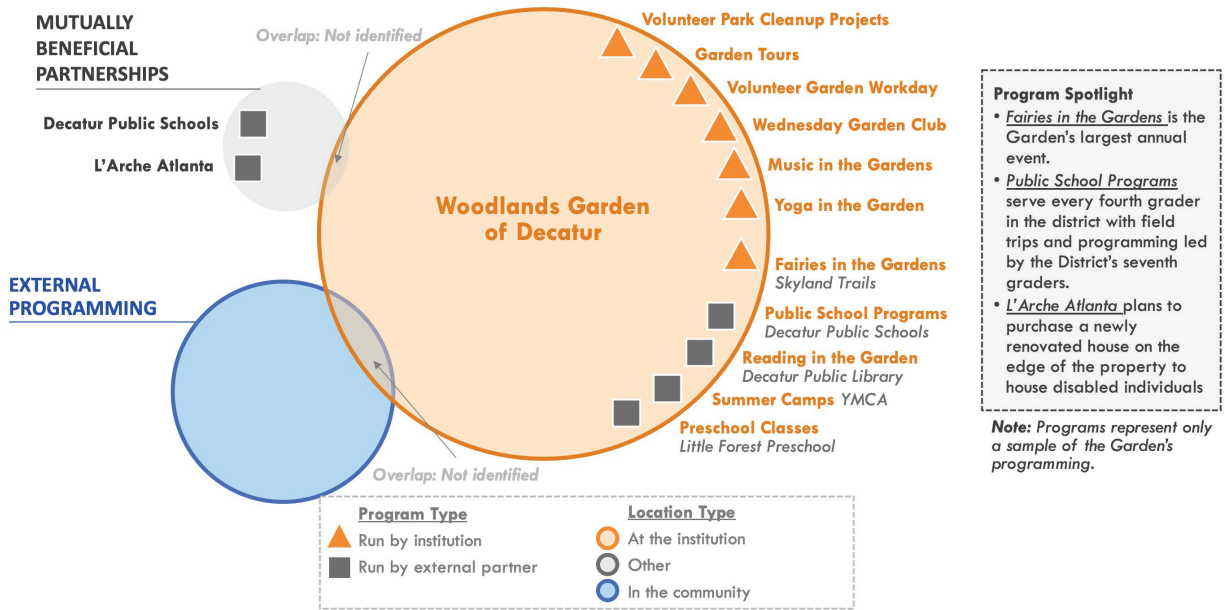
Using data provided by the Woodlands Garden of Decatur, the study team developed a descriptive network map to highlight the different types of connections the Garden maintains with other institutions in the local community. The map illustrates the relationships between Woodlands Garden and those entities that offer programming at the Garden itself and those

that support cross-marketing efforts or have reciprocal relationships with the Garden, and it includes examples of off-site Woodlands Garden-led programming. The map does not provide an exhaustive list of the Garden’s programs but attempts to illustrate a subset of the relationships that the Garden maintains.

*NOTE: The network map is purely descriptive. The connections represented on the map do not necessarily, and are not intended to, provide estimates of the duration, durability, intensity, or broader economic impact of the relationships between the Woodlands Garden of Decatur and any single entity, or the broader network itself. The goal of the network map is to represent the range and diversity of different types of institutions that connect to the Garden in different ways.*



## Woodlands Garden Network Map



The figure above illustrates a *sample* of the connections across the programs offered by Woodlands Garden. Within the orange circle is a small sample of programs conducted on the physical property of the Garden—both programs produced by the Garden and those produced by others. Within the blue circle is a sample of programs produced by Woodlands Garden and offered off-site in the community. The gray circle represents a sample of connections with other regional organizations that have reciprocal relationships with the Garden.