

Children's garden in Dallas aims to teach science

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In this Monday, Sept. 23, 2013 photo, twenty-month-old Camden Haxel plays at the Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden at the Dallas Arboretum, in Dallas. The arboretum that sprawls out on the edge of Dallas' White Rock Lake unveiled the \$62 million new children's garden that aims to teach kids lessons in science while they have fun in the lush landscape. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

From a shaded area where toddlers can climb on a wooden ant or partake in a plant petting zoo, to a place where older kids can shoot water pistols at turbines and watch the energy they created set off water fountains, a new children's garden in Dallas aims to teach kids about science while

they have fun in the lush landscape.

"We can teach better about nature in nature," says Mary Brinegar, president and [chief executive officer](#) of the Dallas Arboretum.

The sprawling arboretum on the edge of Dallas' White Rock Lake unveiled the \$62 million Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden over the weekend. The 8-acre (3.24-hectare) space is designed to help teach science to state and national standards, from preschool to middle school.

It's one of more than 100 children's gardens that have sprouted across America since the idea became popular in the early 1990s, said Casey Sclar, executive director of the American Public Gardens Association. He said they range from a garden inspired by fairy tales (at Delaware's Winterthur museum and gardens) to one focusing on wellness and healing (at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens).

"They all have a different spin or a different way that they engage children," Sclar said.

The Dallas children's garden sets itself apart with its focus on teaching toward educational standards, he said.

Maria Conroy, the arboretum's vice president of education and research, said that when the idea for the children's garden came up almost 17 years ago, organizers wanted it to meet a need in the community, and they settled on helping to boost science test scores.

"What we did was look at what the big [science concepts](#) were for each age group in life and earth science. It was things like they have to know that plants have parts and each part has a different job," she said. "Then we said, 'OK, that's the important thing, so that's going to be our goal for this area and this age group.'"



In this Monday, Sept. 23, 2013 photo, Jacob Brown, 10, right, and Noah Workman, 3, assemble giant flower petals meant to teach parts of the plant at the Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden at the Dallas Arboretum, in Dallas. The arboretum that sprawls out on the edge of Dallas' White Rock Lake unveiled the \$62 million new children's garden that aims to teach kids lessons in science while they have fun in the lush landscape. "We can teach better about nature in nature," says Mary Brinegar, president and chief executive officer of the Dallas Arboretum and Botanical Garden. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

For instance, to teach kids ages 5 to 7 how plants live and grow, designers created oversize plant replicas, including a 16-foot(4.8-meter)-tall one that uses lights to show how water moves from the roots up to the flower. To teach different flower parts, they created a puzzle with oversize parts forming a three-dimensional flower.

Teachers are stationed throughout the garden, and scholars at nearby

Southern Methodist University will study the garden's effect on science education.

It's also hoped that the garden will help kids who have only known a city environment realize a connection to nature, Conroy said.

"We felt like our children are growing up without an understanding of how the Earth works," she said. "And you don't take care of things you don't care about."

A walkway takes visitors through areas aimed at different age groups, starting with one for the youngest visitors, which includes a maze, a sandbox and a shallow stream that can be crossed on artificial lily pads. "Our goal here was just to get these children outside ... playing with nature. Because that's how they learn, by playing," Conroy said.

There's also a 240-foot(73-meter)-long skywalk through the tree canopy, recreations of a wetlands habitat and a cave.

An area called "Earth Cycles" includes an activity to teach kids about erosion by letting them create a landscape of trees and houses in a sandbox and then watch what happens when they activate a rainstorm or river. "It'll go through your landscape and change everything," she said.



In this Monday, Sept. 23, 2013 photo, Anna Cating, 6, looks out from the Texas Skywalk display at the Rory Meyers Children's Adventure Garden at the Dallas Arboretum, in Dallas. The arboretum that sprawls out on the edge of Dallas' White Rock Lake unveiled the \$62 million new children's garden that aims to teach kids lessons in science while they have fun in the lush landscape. It's one of more than 100 children's gardens around the country, a trend that began in the 1990s. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

In that same area, students can examine a box of rocks and try to categorize them, or use their own shadow to tell time with an analemmatic sundial.

On a visit Monday, 8-year-old David Rodriguez declared the sundial "cool," and added that another favorite was "the energy stuff."

A 9,100-square-foot(845-square-meter) building features a plant lab and a 5-foot(1.5-meter)-tall globe that can show things like population density, deforestation or weather events. In the building, kids can also

learn about soil types by reaching with gloves into boxes to feel the differences. Or they can speed up or slow down videos from nature—for instance, watching a hummingbird in slow motion, or watching vines grow faster.

Sara Furlich, who has visited the garden with her three daughters—ages 13, 11 and 5—and with children from the private school she heads, liked the hands-on approach and said, "It's hard to leave each exhibit without learning something."

Her 13-year-old, Sally, enjoyed identifying different types of rocks, and a section on weather: "You could make a little tornado in the bottle." Favorite exhibits for 11-year-old Rachel included sitting in a giant, fake bird's nest, studying the inside of a plant and posing for pictures in turtle shells.

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