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Regional

Drake sees SIUE Gardens as social service

Combine an ever-increasing human population with a growing dependence on technology, mix in suburban sprawl and what you have are fewer opportunities for humans to interact with nature. Yet, many people say that they value communing with nature, even as it becomes more and more difficult to do so. What is the solution? For Jane Drake of Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, at least one answer lies in the public garden.

"I think public gardens are a vital way for people to connect with nature," Drake said. "More and more in our daily lives, we get busy and it is hard to maybe find the time to create natural spaces in our own home and yards. A public garden gives that opportunity, so people can come and engage in nature."

Drake, director of the Gardens at SIUE, was born in Stillwater, Okla., and received her bachelor's degree in science horticulture at Kansas State University and her master's degree in biology from SIUE. For her there is no question why we need public gardens, and a bonus to gardens in areas such as southern Illinois is that they are never static, their appearance always changing with the seasons.

"Seasonality is very important, especially in terms of visitor comfort and visitor experience," she said. "I think everybody is probably familiar with the basic turning of the seasons and the spring renewal and new growth." When asked how the Gardens at SIUE change through the seasons, Drake is categorical.

"Spring is probably the busiest time of the year. It is when we do most of our maintenance and installations," she explained. "It is just a very colorful time of the year. Summer slows down. As the heat rises, everything naturally slows down. Then in the fall, again we get a beautiful transition to the fall colors, which are fabulous here at the Gardens at SIUE. Then winter is really a time when the colors are muted and you get the opportunity to really experience tex-



Photo by Shan Lu

Jane Drake with the author of this article at the SIUE Gardens.

ture in a garden." The Gardens at SIUE are special in the sense that they are a unit of the university but are open to the public.

"Gardens are just a tremendous resource in terms of a living laboratory for units across campus to utilize," Drake said. "So when I think of the ultimate cross-curricular resource, I think of a garden. We can connect to history, music, certainly to science." Some examples of

this use of the gardens by the SIUE community include faculty in the department of biological sciences who are carrying out initial research into ways to reduce the number of invasive species in wetland areas. This research should lead to a more suitable habitat in the Gardens. But it isn't just scientists who can use the Gardens. Sculpture can be found throughout the Gardens, highlighting the interplay between fine art and nature.

Water also plays an essential role in the Gardens, including a turtle pond.

"It was initially man-made with the layout of the grounds," Drake said of the pond. "It is a beautiful place for events and gatherings. The bridge is a very peaceful place to be. It is a very popular spot for photographers, for people to come out and enjoy the day." Drake said that people are connecting with the Gardens through a series of

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annual events. The Gardens consist of 35 acres and have been recognized as a signature garden by the Missouri Botanical Garden, one of only three public gardens with such a distinction.

To keep the Gardens in good shape takes a lot of work. "Volunteers really are our lifeblood," said Drake. "Last year we had over 350 volunteers who gave over 2000 hours of service. It is critical to our success." In addition to natural vegetation and art, the Gardens at SIUE also include an amphitheater and a lantern. Both are favorite places for events such as weddings.

And Drake has great plans for the future. "I would love to have a terrific visitor service space, a visitor center that can just really be a launching point for people who visit – in terms of classes and in terms of self-guided visits. She also said that she envisions the development of a family and children's garden. "I am very interested in edible landscaping and local food systems, and I think that is something that we could do in terms of connectivity with the local community, both in terms of campus and also the Metro East." Drake also sees the Gardens serving a major role in environmental education.

"The Gardens are just a tremendous fit in so many ways," she said. "When we talk about global warming, hardiness zones are key to anyone who gardens. I believe in the last 20 years the hardiness zones have moved north about 150 miles, so they are really a great resource."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.