Take Time to Smell the Flowers, Please!
Public Gardens and Economic Development

William R. Latham
1. Introduction

Public gardens are non-profit cultural institutions that have missions focusing on plants and people, such as education and entertainment using horticulture. (c.f., Luke (2000)) They are located in all parts of the U.S. Some are large and relatively well-known, such as the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. Most, however, are smaller and suffer from low visibility and low attendance compared to more popular sites such as museums, zoos, and for-profit entertainment venues. Many gardens find it difficult to bring in enough funds from admissions to stay operational. (c.f., George (2001)) Consequently most public gardens are constantly in a struggle for donations or grants in competition with each other and with other non-profit institutions. They often lack funds for marketing and public relations and then their low attendance figures makes funders less likely to donate money to them. As a result, public gardens may find themselves in a vicious cycle: because they cannot afford to promote themselves adequately their profiles and attendance are low, which makes funders unwilling to support them at the levels needed to sustain or improve them. Government grants to help break out of the vicious cycle may be difficult to obtain because the benefits to society of public gardens are not well-documented.

The research reported in this paper was designed to provide public gardens with a model that produces evidence, in the form of hard, quantitative data, to show the economic development benefits society receives from gardens. We believe that such economic development data can be used to assist gardens in obtaining grants and other funding, as well as to encourage the kinds of cooperation and recognition from tourist bureaus and local merchants that will promote attendance. While the subject in this paper is public gardens, the concepts and procedures obviously generalize to other public and private institutions such as museums, parks, arenas and entertainment venues of various sorts.
2. Model Overview

The model is designed to calculate the economic impacts of any public garden in the United States on its community, defined as either the county or the state in which the garden lies. The model calculates both the direct and the indirect economic impacts of the spending associated with a garden. Figure 1 provides an overview of the way in which the model processes basic data on: (1) institutional expenditures for the purchase of goods and services, (2) wages and salaries paid to employees, and (3) visitor spending to obtain total impacts for the impact community, which may be defined as the county or the state in which the garden lies or the U.S. as a whole. In the figure the arrows represent the “multiplier,” which is the process by which initial spending in the impact community grows to larger and larger sums as money spent by one group becomes incomes to other groups. The first round of spending leads to additional spending in a continuous series of rounds. The amount of spending in each round is diminished by “leakages” in the form of expenditures on goods and services produced in other areas or by individuals choosing to save.
some of their incomes. In this way the effects of any initial spending eventually taper off so that the effects in the community of any expenditure are limited. In the figure the multiplier effects are shown to be larger as the impact community grows in size from a single county to a state to the whole nation, reflecting the fact that more of the additional spending is captured within the community when the community is larger. Figure 1 also makes clear that, in the model used, spending that occurs outside of the defined impact community does not produce any multiplier impacts.¹

3. Case Study Sites

The model was applied to data acquired from four public gardens in 2003. Table 1 lists the four sites and provides some basic characteristics of them. As can be seen by examining these characteristics, an attempt was made to select sites that vary in terms of metropolitan or urban locations, large and smaller sizes, regions of the country, and types of garden and other characteristics. Figure 1 shows the locations of the four case study sites.