

The Fairchild Challenge: Linking public gardens, schools and communities

Caroline Lewis

Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, Coral Gables, Florida, USA

This workshop helps participants diversify their approach to education outreach.

The growing role of public gardens in education challenges us to become more ambitious in our outreach initiatives. The wording of our institutional missions may vary, but our common agendas include developing lifelong learners who appreciate the beauty and value of nature. Carefully crafted programs like the Fairchild Challenge can help public gardens cultivate large, diverse, untapped audiences and promote botanical awareness, scholarship and stewardship.

About the Fairchild Challenge

The Fairchild Challenge is a creative, competitive, multidisciplinary environmental education program for middle and high school students composed of a series of activities and projects aligned with state and national education standards.

The goal of this outreach program is to motivate urban teenagers to explore the natural environment through a dynamic series of multidisciplinary competitions. The Fairchild Challenge encourages teenagers, and by extension their families and communities, to appreciate the beauty and value of nature, develop critical thinking skills, understand the need for conservation and biodiversity, tap community resources, become actively-engaged citizens, and recognize that individuals do indeed make a difference.

Annually, Fairchild Challenge options may include:

Create/expand/interpret school gardens or natural habitats. Engage communities through environmental outreach. Investigate freshwater flow and quality. Write/perform original verse on environmental topics. Explore cultural uses of plants through intergenerational interviews. Create artwork inspired by tropical plants. Design and produce environmental skits or PSAs. Create Challenge t-shirt designs. Conduct field work during Environmental Immersion Day. Link people and plants through photojournalism. Perform an outdoor theatre scene. Write to decision-makers on environmental issues. Describe plant/animal interactions. Draw environmental cartoons. Exchange botanic information with students in other countries. Compare environmentally/unfriendly products. Reduce/reuse/recycle at school or in your community. Write testimonials documenting a lifestyle change to better the environment. Produce research/opinion papers and projects. Debate environmental issues and policies.

The workshop

Workshop participants learn why we must and how we can design and implement programs like the Fairchild Challenge in order to:

1. Reach broad audiences of learners at the middle and/or high school level
2. Promote civic-minded thinking on local and global issues
3. Involve local organizations/institutions
4. Impact the broader community
5. Promote interdisciplinary learning, and
6. Raise botanical and environmental awareness, scholarship and stewardship.

Participants will explore the Challenge options currently used to engage students and teachers (from school gardens and community outreach to opinion papers and debate competitions), suggest additional Challenges and topics, and evaluate sample student entries. Participants will identify their sites' potential topics, community partners, and funders.

This workshop is appropriate for institutions with already well established education programs, as well as those just embarking on education outreach efforts.

Only in its fifth year, the Fairchild Challenge already engages over 16,500 teenagers of diverse backgrounds, interests and abilities in the multicultural urban environment of Miami, Florida. Educators from over seventeen sites nationally and internationally have been trained to replicate the model in their cities and towns. This creative, competitive, multidisciplinary program challenges teenagers to ask questions, empowers them to find solutions, respects their opinions, and, makes them feel, as one sixteen year old put it, "important and needed."