



5 Interpretive Signage

A good interpretive sign acts as an eye-opener, making visitors excited about something they hadn't noticed or thought about before. It relates directly to the surrounding display and encourages visitors to look more closely. Sadly one often sees signs which contain a lot of factual information and make no connection with the plant display. In this case the sign fails to interpret anything at all and is little more than a page from an encyclopedia.

As with all forms of interpretation, signs should communicate a clear message (theme). This can be used effectively for a variety of purposes:

- to inform the public of new developments
- to communicate the rules of the garden
- to highlight something of special interest, or
- to tell people about the importance of plant collections.

Interpretive signs – good or bad?

Interpretive signs have a number of advantages and disadvantages when compared to other forms of interpretation. The main advantage is that signage offers 24-hour interpretation. It is available to visitors at all times. This makes it a practical option when you have limited interpretation staff. Unlike brochures, interpretive signs have a specific context - they can relate directly to the plant display and draw attention to something of interest.

This temporary sign entitled "Watch this space" informs visitors about the development of a Water Wise Demonstration Garden (Kirstenbosch NBG).



However, signs are definitely second best when compared to more interactive forms of interpretation such as guided walks and discovery stations. They are impersonal and can't respond to visitors or capture their imagination like a good interpretive guide can.

Something to consider is the visual impact of signs. To communicate effectively with visitors, signs need to be positioned in prominent places. This can cause visual clutter in the garden and detract from its natural beauty.

Perhaps the most serious drawback is that signs tend to be installed in the garden and then forgotten. As the months pass, they become old and shabby and the plant displays start looking tired and overgrown. In the absence of an ongoing maintenance programme, interpretive signs can become conspicuous symbols of decay and neglect!

Types of signage

Interpretive signs can be made of a range of different materials and designs. Simple inexpensive signs can be made of paper or cardboard which has been laminated with plastic to make it waterproof. Signs made of more durable materials such as wood, metal or enamel are generally more costly and complex to produce. The most important consideration is what you are going to use the signs for (their purpose). This will help you decide whether you need a system of temporary signage, or permanent signs, or both.

Temporary signs are made of a sturdy frame with a removable sign face (see Box 1 on page 30). The sign face should be simple and easy to produce so that it can be easily changed or replaced as the need arises. Temporary signs are especially useful in gardens which are developing rapidly or where the displays are very seasonal. They are also very useful when starting an interpretation programme because they allow you to experiment with new ideas and styles. Good interpretation is dynamic and responsive to visitors' needs, so in many ways temporary signage is the preferred option.

Permanent signs are made to last several years and can be used for special features or areas in the garden which are permanent and which attract visitors throughout the year.

Temporary signs are useful for interpreting seasonal displays, such as spring annuals (Kirstenbosch NBG).



Your final choice for signage will be influenced by your budget, the local availability of technology and materials, and the degree of vandalism in your garden. Consider using local talent and expertise (e.g. sign writers, woodcarvers, stone masons) as this will add a distinctive and unique character to your garden.

Temporary Signs

Used for: seasonal displays, new developments (work in progress), visitor management, testing new sign ideas.

Materials

A sign frame made of metal or wood.
A sign face made of paper or cardboard which has been laminated with plastic.
The text and images may be done by hand or on a computer.

Installation

Easy to move – the sign frame has one or two pointed legs which can simply be pushed into the ground (if it's not too hard or rocky).

Advantages

- flexible (easy to change)
- inexpensive to produce
- allows you to be responsive (e.g. to events, current environmental issues or commonly asked questions)

Disadvantages

- need regular replacement (high maintenance)

Permanent Signs

Used for: features of general/historic interest, year-round displays, permanent collections.

Materials

A sign frame or plinth made of metal, wood or stone.
A sign face made of baked enamel, vinyl, plastic or aluminium. The text and images may be hand-painted, silk-screened or computer-generated, depending on the technique used.

Installation

Depends on the design. Sign posts are typically concreted into the ground.

Advantages

- long-lasting (low maintenance)

Disadvantages

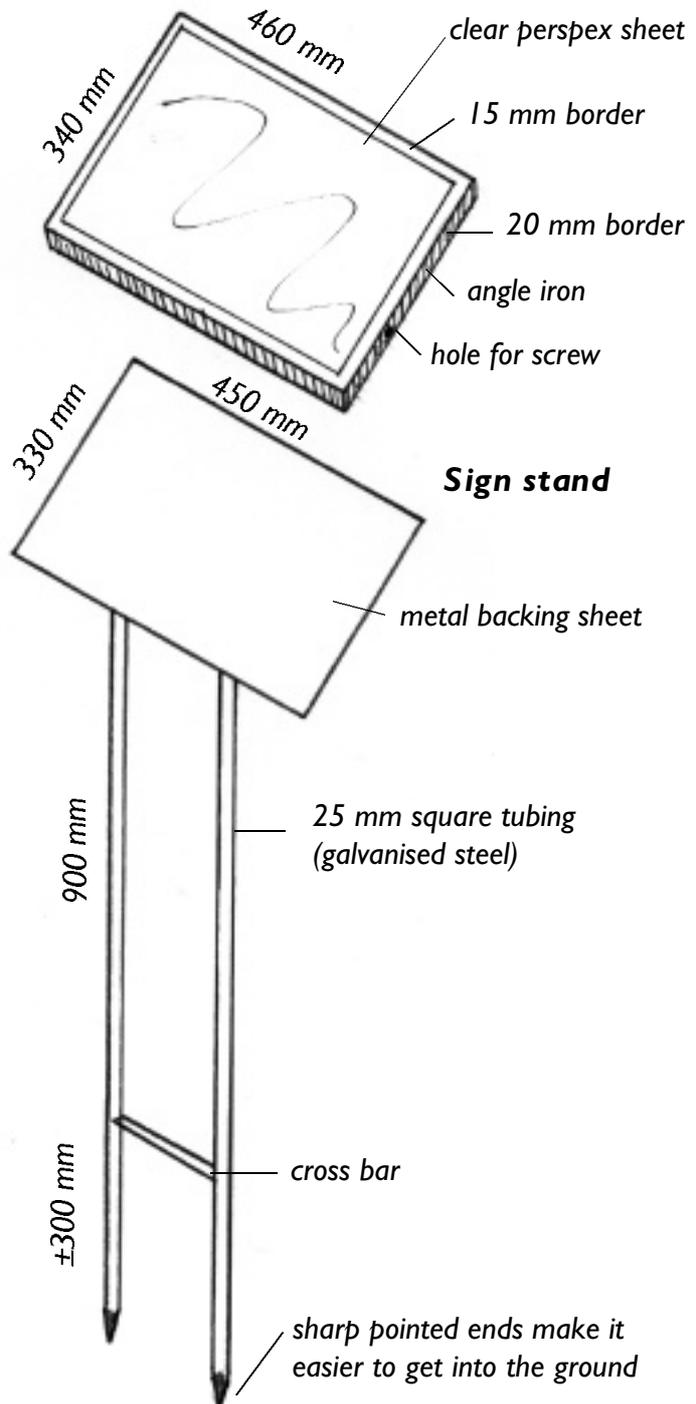
- plant displays may die or change (so the signs become obsolete)
- inflexible (not easy to change)
- more costly to produce

Box 1 A sign frame for temporary signs



Temporary signs require a frame which is sturdy yet light enough to carry and move around the garden. Here are the specifications and design details of a sign frame developed by the Witwatersrand NBG. It consists of two parts: a metal sign stand and an overlying cover of clear perspex.

Overlying cover



Built-in evaluation

As discussed earlier, the best signage is created using formative evaluation (see page 10). This occurs when you put up a draft copy of the sign and observe visitors responding to it. Do they stop and look at the sign? Do they read it, and for how long? Use these observations to identify any shortcomings and improve the sign. You may be surprised how a few small changes can make a big difference in impact.

Maintenance

When you are planning interpretive signage, it is important to consider the maintenance implications. Outdoor signs are subject to harsh conditions like sunlight and rain and require ongoing attention. They will need to be checked regularly for signs of vandalism and cleaned to remove dirt, bird droppings and pen marks.

You also have to check the plant display which the sign refers to. Plants may need to be pruned back or replanted when they have died. It is good policy to remove signs which are faded or worn, even if you intend to replace them. Peeling, faded or damaged signs create a poor impression and are negative publicity for the garden.

Who is responsible for the maintenance of signage in your garden? This needs to be clarified from the outset. It is helpful to have a garden map with all interpretive signs marked on it to keep track of signs moving or disappearing.

Making signs more interactive

There are several ways to make signs more interesting and interactive. These may require extra maintenance, so keep this in mind when planning and designing interactive exhibits.

Lift a flap

A simple way to engage visitors is to pose a question on the sign and to put the answer and explanation under a flap. This technique is most effective if it's a question that visitors have asked themselves (and not something obscure that you think people should ask!).



The question on this sign has effectively aroused this visitor's interest and curiosity. (Desert Botanic Garden, USA)

Including objects

Signs may include objects which people can touch or smell. For example, a sign about plants that are used for dyeing (colouring wool or cloth) may include some wool samples to show which colours can be obtained with natural plant dyes. This makes the subject more interesting because for most of us 'seeing is believing'. The challenge is usually to make these objects vandal and weatherproof. Be prepared to replace items regularly as they become worn or disappear.

This sign includes samples of wool which were made using natural plant dyes. Unfortunately we found that the wool colours fade very quickly in sunlight, which makes it a high maintenance display (Kirstenbosch NBG).



Using electronics

Simple audio devices can be used to add pre-recorded sounds of bird calls and other animal noises to interpretive signs. Visitors can look at the illustration of a particular bird or animal and push the button next to it to hear its call. However the use of electronics is not recommended unless you have a safe, vandal-proof environment and staff who are able to repair and maintain it.

Invite visitor response

Visitors generally welcome opportunities to give input, whether in written or verbal form. You could capitalise on this interest by involving visitors in monitoring something. For example, a sign identifying different types of wildlife in the garden such as tortoises, moles, common birds, lizards, etc. could be accompanied by a log book where visitors can record their wildlife sightings. The combination

of interpretive signage with an opportunity to give written feedback is very effective because it allows people to apply newly acquired knowledge. You will also benefit by gathering detailed information about animal activity in the garden.

Similarly you could ask visitors to help investigate the pollination of a particular plant species and provide a log book where they can record their observations (date, time and pollinator activity). Of course the log book would need to be housed in a weatherproof box.



One of the most popular interpretive signs in the Desert Botanic Garden is a sign with pre-recorded bird calls. Notice how the signage has been grouped in a shady area for maximum visitor comfort.

The Desert Botanic Garden offers several opportunities in the garden for visitors to give input. Here there is an interpretive sign identifying animals which are commonly seen in the garden. Next to it is a book inviting visitors to record their wildlife sightings.



Having fun with temporary signs

When I first started working at Kirstenbosch, I felt I still had a lot to learn about interpretation. I was asked to produce interpretive signs for the garden, but I didn't yet have the confidence or experience to make important decisions about the format, content and writing style for permanent signs. So I decided to experiment with different ideas first, using inexpensive temporary signs.

Fortunately the curator supported this idea and we had about a dozen metal sign frames made, each with a screw-on perspex cover. This allowed me to put a simple paper sign underneath the cover. The signs were easy and inexpensive to make, so I felt free to try out different ideas and styles of writing. During the months that followed I tried a variety of techniques and learnt a lot in the process.

At first I made simple paper signs by cut-and-pasting the text and images. I had the signs laminated with plastic at a 'plastic sandwiching' bureau to make them waterproof. When I put them up in the garden, I soon realised that white or yellow paper was very reflective in sunlight and too harsh on the eyes. Paper of a darker colour faded too quickly outdoors, so I started experimenting with recycled papers. I found the bits of fibre embedded in recycled paper helped to reduce the glare and didn't fade.

One morning I was walking in the garden and noticed that the signs had 'misted up'. Water condensation was getting trapped under the perspex cover. After some deliberation I took the covers off and hoped for the best. Luckily there was no problem with vandalism and the plastic lamination proved to be enough to waterproof the paper sign. On average these temporary signs lasted about six months to a year, depending on how well the sign had been sealed when it was plastic laminated.

Over the years I've had a lot of fun experimenting with different ideas and themes. My favourite subjects were plants with interesting stories - how people use them, their ecology, the animals they are associated with, and so on. I especially enjoyed working with the horticulturists. Listening to them talk about their work inspired me to write several signs about the dynamic nature of plant collections (how plants are collected and accessioned, how they have to be regularly propagated and replanted). Having a system of temporary signage which was flexible and easy to change enabled me to gain experience quickly and develop my interpretive skills.



Full-colour signs: dream or nightmare?

The new glasshouse at Kirstenbosch was built in 1997 to display the succulent collection. The building was designed in a modern style, so we felt it was appropriate to use a more elegant system of signage than the robust green signs used outdoors in the garden. Our graphics department had just acquired a powerful Apple Mac computer, so we decided to design our own full-colour signs in-house. The immediate advantage of using this technology was that we could make use of our large collection of slides. We felt that full-colour signs would add interest to the succulent displays and desert landscapes, especially during times when there was not much in flower.

Once the text had been written, edited and translated and the images had been sourced and selected, the graphic design process could start. However we couldn't scan the slides on our desktop scanner because this would've resulted in grainy, poor quality images. The slides were therefore sent to a professional 'repro house' for high resolution scanning on a drum scanner. The digital images were then returned to us on disk. Once the images had been placed in the document, we did a final printout on our laser printer. This often took ages (half an hour per page) because the files were enormous and the printer didn't have sufficient memory to process it more quickly. Once everything had been thoroughly checked, we saved the file on disk and sent it off to a printing bureau. Here it was printed onto weather-proof vinyl using a special large format printer.

Over a period of several months I learnt all about QuarkXpress™, digital printing technologies, high-resolution scanning, fonts and settings which change inexplicably when you bring your file to the printing bureau, and lots more. There were some tense moments, but we met the deadline with a product which looked smart and professional.

However within three months some of the signs had already faded dramatically. When I approached the printing bureau about their one-year guarantee, they said this guarantee only applied to vertically mounted signs. I realised that our horizontally angled signs were getting almost twice the amount of direct sun, which effectively halved their lifespan. We were encouraged to try new printing technologies as these became available. Over a period of two years we reprinted the signs several times and eventually found a product which didn't fade so quickly. In the meantime a new problem had arisen: the printers had great difficulty matching the background colour from one printing batch to the next. There were countless phone calls and many courier trips to and from the printing bureau.

Our experience with computer-generated colour signage has shown that it can be an expensive option which requires high maintenance. Although the initial cost of interpretive materials was covered by a sponsorship, we are now left with the cost of regular reprinting. We also spent a lot of time and effort on solving technological problems, which left less time for evaluation and the development of new materials. With the power of hindsight, I think we could have achieved our interpretive goals with a less costly and sophisticated type of signage.

When you are doing your interpretive planning, bear in mind that your programme has to be sustainable in the medium and long term. Consider the financial and human resources available to you and choose your interpretive products accordingly. Good luck!

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