



# Visitor Orientation



Have you ever seen visitors in your garden looking lost or confused? Do people tend to stay in one part of the garden, leaving large areas unvisited? Have you wondered why they aren't circulating in the more interesting or scenic sections of your garden?

The chances are that visitors are simply unaware of what they are missing and don't know the garden as well as you do. It is therefore necessary to *orientate* visitors when they arrive and tell them what the garden has to offer and where to find it. This can be achieved with a combination of signage and garden maps at the entrance, directional signs and a well-designed system of circulation routes.

## At the entrance

The entrance to the garden is the best place to welcome visitors and introduce them to the layout of the garden. You can do this either on a large *orientation map*, or with a *visitor guide brochure*. This is a good place to 'advertise' the main features of interest in your garden such as theme gardens or important plant collections. Remember to include a short sentence to describe what's special or interesting about the collection or theme area. *e.g. The Water-wise Garden shows how you can create a lush, colourful garden at home which uses minimal water.*

The entrance area is usually a good focal point for communicating with visitors. It may be useful to have a notice board for the following:

- What's happening in the garden – new developments, collections or special events.
- Seasonal highlights – what's in flower at the moment.
- Guided tours – the theme, date and starting time.
- Appeals for help or community participation – *e.g. fund-raising, call for volunteers.*

*A notice board at the entrance to the Desert Botanic Garden advertises events in the garden and trail guides (which are available from the pay point).*



### Garden Map Checklist

Have you remembered to include the following on your map?

- Name of the garden and logo
- Toilets
- Entrance and exit points
- Parking
- Telephone(s)
- Restaurant/tea garden
- Visitor information
- Gift shop
- All the special areas of interest
- Compass points or an arrow indicating north
- An arrow indicating 'You are here'

#### Optional extras:

- A disclaimer e.g. People using this garden do so at their own risk
- Rules of the garden
- Names of geographic landmarks e.g. rivers, mountains, street names

## Garden maps

As mentioned earlier, orientation maps can be made available in a brochure or on signs in the garden.

Remember that many people struggle to interpret maps, especially if they are flat plans, seen from the air like a street map. It therefore helps to do a more three dimensional type of map, with pictures of buildings and other features which people can recognise such as statues, ponds, fountains or palm trees.

Labels on the map should clearly indicate the main features of interest in the garden as well as visitor facilities such as toilets and public telephones. To save space on the map, you can use symbols for visitor facilities.

Maps should be installed in such a way that their north-south orientation corresponds to the surrounding environment. Remember to include the compass points on the map and *ensure that north on the map points in the direction of north in the garden*. A big arrow with **YOU ARE HERE** makes it easier for visitors to locate their position on the map.

OK, so the sun sets in the west. But the map says north is ahead, so that means I need to turn it 45 degrees clockwise . . . or is it anti-clockwise? . . . and I've got to do this all in my head . . . mutter, mutter . . .





*In the Desert BG, all the trails are circular and each trail can be distinguished by its surfacing (brick, laterite, hard earth). This makes it very easy for visitors to follow the main trail and know when there is another one leading off it.*

## **Garden layout**

It is important to have a system of clearly laid out paths or routes through the garden so that visitors have easy access to the areas which you want them to visit. It is helpful if there is a hierarchy of paths, with large broad paths for major circulation routes and smaller pathways for minor routes. Major and minor routes can be indicated on a garden map, which makes it easier for visitors to navigate through the garden.

Circular routes are a good idea because visitors know that they will finish up where they started. This means they can relax and enjoy the displays, and don't have to worry about getting lost. For most people it is tiring to have to consult a map at every intersection, so from a visitor's point of view it is best to have a clear layout of paths without too many side paths.

## **Directional signs**

A system of directional signs helps visitors to find their way around the garden. It should always include signs pointing to the main exit points, the nearest toilet facilities and the restaurant if you have one.

Directional signs usually consist of a signpost with individual signs (arrows) pointing in the intended directions. This system generally works well, but has one major disadvantage: people don't really see signage which is parallel to the direction in which they are moving. This may cause problems in certain situations. See if you can spot the problem on page 55.



*Directional signs at Kirstenbosch NBG.*



### Temporary directional signs

If your garden hosts regular public events like concerts, slide shows or exhibitions it is a good idea to have a system of temporary directional signs which you can put up as the need arises. The most flexible system is to have a set of robust free-standing sign frames. This allows you to simply stick on a paper sign with the name of the event and an arrow. The sign frame should be portable but heavy enough to stand on a flat surface such as a path or car park without blowing over.

Who is responsible for putting up and removing temporary signage in your garden? Make sure that you have clarified this from the outset, because there can't be much worse than tacky notices which are still hanging up three days after an event. On the other hand a good signage system can really add a professional touch to your organisation: simple neat signs which help visitors to find a venue quickly and easily are bound to create a good impression.



### **Directional signs – some practical tips**

- Wherever possible install signs at right angles to the main direction of visitor flow – in this position they are most visible and most likely to be noticed.
- Where vandalism is a problem, install the sign a few metres from the path in a position where it is less accessible. Often people scratch or deface signs when they are bored or waiting for friends. This is less likely to occur if signs are difficult to reach, surrounded by thorny bushes or on a steep bank.
- Use clear bold lettering which is easy to read from a distance of ten metres.

## **A signage manual**

How many different types of signs do you have in your garden? You may have directional signs, different kinds of interpretive signs (temporary and/or permanent), garden maps and interpretive plant labels, to name but a few. Imagine if every sign had a different shape, colour and format - it would look like a street market!

To ensure some consistency in garden signage, it is useful to document the design and specifications for each sign type in a signage manual. Try to standardise on materials and design elements such as colour, format and layout, as this helps to create visual unity and strengthens your corporate identity.

A signage manual typically contains drawings and details for each sign type and includes the following information:

- Sign frame – design; dimensions; materials; manufacturer; how to install it
- Sign face – design; dimensions; material; how to attach it to the frame; basic layout; fonts used and font sizes; position of logo

It is best to adopt a flexible modular system of signage which can change according to the needs of the garden. For example, you may suddenly find there is a need for temporary directional signs when you start hosting events in the garden. The signage manual therefore needs to be updated regularly to reflect these changes.

A signage manual is not a straight-jacket which is intended to stifle innovation and change. It is meant to be a guideline document which ensures continuity in design and manufacture, and prevents the unchecked proliferation of different sign styles and formats in the garden.

*Directional signs at the Desert Botanic Garden.*





## Managing a signage system

The current signage system at Kirstenbosch was installed in the garden ten years ago. The system was designed by a contracted professional and includes a comprehensive design and installation manual. An important aspect of the system is its modular design, which allows for individual directional signs to be added to the signposts whenever necessary. A botanic garden changes constantly, which makes this kind of flexibility critical.

Shortly after installation, a number of trail signs on the estate were badly vandalised. However we noticed that the few boards that had been placed out of reach on the bank above paths were left untouched. In addition to replacing the damaged signs, we proceeded to move all signposts to just beyond the reach of potential vandals. This simple measure proved extremely successful and vandalism was reduced by 95%.

We also found that the time taken for the signage company to supply signs was reduced by several weeks when we arranged for a stock of blank boards (cut to size and painted) to be held in reserve awaiting urgent orders.

**Phillip le Roux – Curator, Kirstenbosch NBG.**

*Banners can be very effective to advertise events in the garden. Here they are used to direct visitors to the ticket sales area (Kirstenbosch NBG).*

