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FEATURES

Learning the lay of the land: Botanic Garden welcomes new director of horticulture



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Key Points

Steven Conaway is the new director of horticulture at New England Botanic Garden in Boylston.

Conaway says he's been getting to know "the rhythms of the garden and a better understanding of what needs to happen."

Conaway was previously associate director of Horticulture at Wave Hill, a public garden of renown based in the Bronx, New York City.

As with many people who like to garden, [Steven Conaway](#) enjoys this time of year.

"I do love spring," he said.

In particular, he is a big fan the beginning of April. "You start to see some dramatic changes in the garden and start to shake off the real threat of winter." March can often have the real threat of snow, he noted in a recent interview.

On the other hand, "In a four-season garden, I appreciate a garden in every season," Conaway said. For one thing, he's a New Englander.

Conaway has more garden to appreciate and take care of than most people as the new director of horticulture at [New England Botanic Garden](#) in Boylston.

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'A lot of listening and walking'

He came on board in December, so this is his first spring at New England Botanic Garden which spans 200 acres and where the horticulture department with a staff of about 12 people maintains a diverse array of formal and naturalistic gardens, subtropical conservatories, managed woodlands, trails, meadows, and growing facilities.

Conaway's getting to know the lay of the land.

Right now, "I'm doing a lot of listening and walking," Conaway said. "Getting to know the rhythms of the garden and a better understanding of what needs to happen, when. Talking to the talented staff to really learn the ins and outs."

New England Botanic Garden is owned and operated by the Worcester County Horticultural Society, one of the oldest societies of its kind in the country. In 2022, the nonprofit organization became [the first botanic garden in the country to earn Green Zone Certification](#) from the American Green Zone Alliance for its efforts to decarbonize its horticulture operations. In 2023 it was voted "Top Botanic Garden in the U.S." by TravelAwaits.

"They have an ambitious strategic plan here," Conaway said.

Initiatives in recent years have ranged from national plant conservation to The Ramble, a 1.5-acre "family garden" that opened in 2022.

Conaway is part of a New England Botanic Garden overall team that also includes administrators, educators, and program creators developing initiatives that build the significance of the garden's plant collections, expand sustainable horticulture practices, and advance it as world-class public garden that welcomes more than 200,000 annual visitors.

"Steve's impressive background in public gardens and plant science, along with his passion for sustainability will surely help our Garden grow, in alignment with our

strategic plan, as a resource for the region and a leader in ecological horticulture,” Grace Elton, chief executive officer of New England Botanic Garden, said when Conaway's appointment was announced.

'You wear a lot of hats'

The teamwork component was fully at work when Conaway arrived in the middle of the garden's popular annual holiday "[Night Lights](#)" display last December.

The program is an important one for the garden as it is its biggest fundraiser of the year. The theme was "Color Cascade" and a quarter million lights were arranged in dazzling combinations and displayed throughout the indoor and outdoor areas of the garden. Visitors could wander through themed areas, capture photos against backdrops and enjoy a lively atmosphere of holiday cheer.

Planning has already been underway for this year's "Night Lights." In addition to spring flower bulbs, Conaway could find himself involved with electric light bulbs.

"In the garden world you wear a lot of hats. The garden staff are also part time electricians for the light show," he said, praising their "electrical know-how."

It was felt it would be a good idea for Conaway to start in December so that he could get a feel for "Night Lights," he said.

Elton has called the "Night Lights" program "a full staff effort." That even includes the gift shop where there will be planning for items such as special gifts related to the theme for 2025.

Conaway said last month that he was struck by "the sophistication and all the work they do to pull off that show ... I was less familiar with putting on light shows. This is a special case here where our light show is entirely home-spun. A lot of gardens will have outside parties do installations. I was really impressed that it's done in-house. I knew about the programs the garden put on but I didn't know the team

here was involved in so many aspects of it. There are so many great collaborations, supporting each other. That's been my experience with everything here," he said.

Connecting plants and people

Conaway is originally from Southern New Hampshire where he said his parents were avid gardeners. "I've worked on farms and landscape companies," he said. He did an apprenticeship on a subsistence farm in Maine focused on crop conservation and developed an interest in the connection between plants and people.

He studied environmental horticulture at the University of New Hampshire and earned his doctoral degree studying plant pathology at Pennsylvania State University.

Conaway directed ecological restoration efforts across 750 acres of protected open space at Connecticut's Greenwich Land Trust, and most recently served as associate director of Horticulture at Wave Hill, a public garden of renown based in the Bronx, New York City. While in this position he also taught classes for New York Botanical Garden's Sustainable Horticulture Design certificate program.

Although he lived in New York City for 12 years, "I've always been a New England guy. I always felt like a fish out of water (in New York)," he said.

Conaway has now moved to Boylston, so he lives in the town he works in.

In an [introductory video](#) for New England Botanic Garden shortly after coming on board he said that if he could be a plant it would be *nyssa sylvatica*, or tupelo. The tupelo is a local plant that has lovely colors in the fall and "I like to show off once in a while," Conaway said. The plant also produces a fruit that migrating birds like to consume. Conaway said he likes to share.

The video was in the spirit of his new job.

"As a botanic garden we're communicating the world of plants to the general public," Conaway said.

"We get to do really creative and exciting programs. People are excited to share their work with each department so that people are having the best experience they can have in the garden."

In his first spring and first year at the garden "my goal is to just follow through all the existing plans as best as possible," he said.

"I'm really interested in just doing what we're doing even better this year and take a hard look at our living collection and opportunities for conservation and getting to know the place and getting to know the folks here."