



REPORT

Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture Program Evaluation

PREPARED BY

Kera Collective

FOR

Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens

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Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture Program Evaluation

COASTAL MAINE
BOTANICAL
GARDENS

kera
COLLECTIVE

PREPARED FOR

Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens
<https://www.mainegardens.org/>
Boothbay, ME

Main Contact:

Irene Barber, Adult Education Program Manager
and Horticultural Therapist, HTR

PREPARED BY

Kera Collective
www.keracollective.com

Kera Collective team members involved in this study:

Katie Chandler, *Senior Researcher*

Rachel Jackson, *Consulting Analyst*

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01 Summary and Key Takeaways



Summary and Key Takeaways

This section presents key takeaways from the program evaluation of the Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture program at Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens. The takeaways are organized by the programs' intended outcomes (presented below) and informed by the results of the formative evaluation, the interview data, and our years of experience working with museums and other cultural organizations. Overall, CMBG's Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture program is successful in supporting the intended outcomes for participants, but there are still ways to strengthen the program experience and build community among participants.

Program Outcomes

1. Expand their awareness or deepen their knowledge of sustainable practices in horticulture
2. Apply new sustainable practices in their horticulture businesses
3. Feel inspired to continue seeking out knowledge about sustainable practices in horticulture that are responsive to the changing environmental and economic climate
4. Shift their business practices or professional focus in response to the changing environmental and economic climate
5. Feel connected to a community of peers with a shared interest
6. Value CMBG as a go-to resource for professional development in sustainable horticulture

01

CMBG is successful in expanding participants' awareness and knowledge of sustainable practices in horticulture.

(Outcome 1)

Similar to the formative evaluation results, many participants reported learning something new about sustainable horticulture practices from their program, ranging from incorporating native plants and limiting invasives, to understanding more about soil health, to learning about water management. Participants appreciate how the program connects them to new techniques and resources they wouldn't otherwise know about, and they highly value the quality of the instructors at CMBG.

02

Many participants apply a new approach or shift their professional or personal horticulture practices as a result of participating in a program. (Outcomes 2 + 4)

More than one-half of those interviewed said they made a change in techniques or their mindset after participating in a program. Moreover, several professionals reported learning about ways to communicate in a "friendly" and "informative" way to help clients understand the benefits of sustainable landscape choices. This is significant because it amplifies the concept of sustainable horticulture beyond those who participated in the program directly to the broader public—for example, one described successfully convincing a client to plant a meadow of native plants along their property by explaining the benefits to pollinators. Another described shifting their mindset from working "for the customer" to working "for the ecosystem" and its needs.

However, it is notable (and consistent with findings from the formative evaluation) that a few participants noted misalignment of program content with their expectations (one professional felt the program they attended was more for hobbyists, and one non-professional felt the program they attended was more for professionals). Being clear about audience in program descriptions is key to connecting participants with information that is relevant and can be applied in their own personal or professional practice.

03

Many participants have a genuine interest in continuing to learn about sustainable practices in horticulture, either for personal use or professional development. (Outcome 3)

Interview data indicates that most were motivated to participate in a CMBG program because they wanted to learn more or develop their professional toolkit—they came in with the perspective that “there’s always more to learn,” and their curiosity continues after the program. Consistent with the survey results from the formative evaluation, interview data suggest that one key contributing factor to their continued curiosity is instructor quality, which participants described as informative, passionate, and generous with their time. Recall that the highest rated statement for course quality in the formative evaluation was about the knowledgeable and experienced instructors.

04

Advanced Studies programs spark connections between some participants, but there is room to strengthen a community of practice among participants. (Outcome 5)

It is promising that a few participants said they felt like part of a “community” of people working in service of more sustainable horticulture practices. These results are similar to the formative results where participants moderately rated feeling connected to a community, but interview data adds new context to the ways participants are connecting with one another. In particular, they enjoyed the opportunities to hear not only from the instructors, but also from other participants about examples of how they are pursuing sustainable horticulture practices in their work. It is likely that hearing about others’ experiences helped spark ideas for their own work and made sustainable horticulture feel more relatable and attainable.

Moreover, while several said they connected with other participants following a program (e.g., to place a group order for native plants), several others said they were interested but had not yet connected with other participants. This suggests that a gentle reminder or some support from CMBG could help more participants connect with one another, fostering a sense of community. One simple way to do this could be let participants opt in to share their email with other participants during the program registration process, with the explanation that it will help them continue the conversation with other participants after the program ends.

05

Participants highly value CMBG as a go-to resource for professional development in sustainable horticulture.

(Outcome 6)

Nearly all said they would attend another program with CMBG in the future. Key motivators for returning for another CMBG program were a positive experience with previous programs (a combination of relevant topics and quality instructors) and alignment of the schedule with their availability. Several voiced preferences for fall and winter programs because it is more convenient than in the spring and summer when their work is busiest, and few others appreciated that online programs offer additional flexibility for working professionals. Recall from the formative evaluation that there is strong interest in hybrid programs (partially online and partially onsite); if scheduled during the fall and winter, online or hybrid programs would be very responsive to working professional's seasonal availability and working hours.

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02 Study Background



About the Study

Kera Collective (Kera) was contracted by Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens (CMBG) to conduct an evaluation of their Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture program, funded by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant. This evaluation builds on a prior evaluation conducted from November 2022 through March 2023.

The main objectives for the interviews are to understand the lasting effects of participation in the Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture programs by exploring the extent to which participants achieved the following intended outcomes:

1. Expand their awareness or deepen their knowledge of sustainable practices in horticulture
2. Apply new sustainable practices in their horticulture businesses
3. Feel inspired to continue seeking out knowledge about sustainable practices in horticulture that are responsive to the changing environmental and economic climate
4. Shift their business practices or professional focus in response to the changing environmental and economic climate
5. Feel connected to a community of peers with a shared interest
6. Value CMBG as a go-to resource for professional development in sustainable horticulture

METHODOLOGY

Using lists provided by CMBG, Kera recruited participants who had participated in at least one Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture program in the past 12 months. Recruitment occurred during Summer and Fall 2023. CMBG sent an initial email invitations to 65 participants, followed by an email from Kera to schedule the interview and two reminder emails. Participants were offered a \$25 gift card as a thank you for completing an interview.

Response from participants was low for our initial outreach (7 interviews), so we adjusted the incentive to be a one year membership to CMBG, and the Adult Education Program Manager reached out by phone to participants who had not yet completed an interview to encourage participation. We secured three additional interviews for a total of 10 interviews.

We used an open-ended interview guide (see Appendix A), asking probing questions to better understand participants' thoughts and experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded. This data provides a rich complement the formative survey results, which were primarily quantitative. Interview data provides additional context, details, and new insights that build on the findings from the formative evaluation.

DATA ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

Interview data are qualitative and results are descriptive. In analyzing the data, the evaluator studied the interview transcripts looking for meaningful patterns and grouping similar responses as trends emerged. The study objectives and our professional experience informed the analysis. Findings are reported in narrative, supplemented with exemplary quotations from participants.

Trends and themes in the data are presented from most- to least-frequently occurring. When describing the findings, this report uses qualitative data terms such as “most” and “a few,” as is appropriate for the sample size and the type of data collected. Such descriptive language is intended to provide readers with a sense of the general trends.

03 Findings: Interviews



Overview

Kera Collective conducted 10 remote interviews with individuals who participated in at least one Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens' Advanced Studies in Professional Horticulture program within the past year. Interviews were conducted from June to October 2023. The response rate was 15 percent.¹

Participant Characteristics

Relationship to the Professional Horticulture Field

Program attendees had varying relationships with landscaping and horticulture, ranging from gardening enthusiast to professional gardener, or owning landscaping-focused businesses.

- **Professionals:** Six attendees worked for or owned a landscaping or gardening business; some worked as landscape estimators, designers, consultants, and contractors.
- **Non-professionals:** Four attendees were hobbyists or gardening enthusiasts, not professionals in horticulture. A few shared they were working on their gardens at home, and one teaches classes on edible native plants.

Program Participation

Attendees were asked which programs they have participated in at CMBG—several had participated in more than one CMBG program, so program participation counts exceed the number of participants interviewed.

- Three participated in **Resilient Landscapes in Built Environments – Section I**
- Three participated in **Resilient Landscapes in Built Environments – Section II**
- Seven attended the **Green Spotlight Series**

Note that three who had attended one of the Resilient Landscapes sections also attended at least one Green Spotlight Series program.

¹ We recruited from a list of 65 participants, and 10 completed interviews.

Motivations to Attend the Program

Attendees were asked what motivated them to participate in programs at CMBG. The majority of attendees were eager to broaden their understanding of sustainable practices and learn how to improve their horticulture practices.

- **Learning opportunity:** Eight, including six professionals and two non-professionals, attended because of a general desire to learn more and to improve their horticulture knowledge, with one gardening business owner saying, "There's always more to learn." A few professionals referred to the programs they attended as a professional development opportunity.
- **Schedule and format:** Two professionals also noted that winter is a better time to attend programs, given their increased availability compared to their busier summers. One, who has been attending programs at CMBG for years, believed that the programs were not originally "conducive to working persons." But now that CMBG has begun offering online programs, they can fit the courses into their busy schedule.
- **Special interest:** Two said they attended because the program topics were focused on their special interest (e.g., naturalist studies, native plants).



I'm interested in being better at my job landscaping. That's kind of why I started doing it, but going to the gardens has helped cultivate a passion in me for ecological horticulture and growing in landscaping and gardening responsibly with our ecosystem and how gardening positively or negatively affects our ecosystem.

- Professional Landscaper, Business Owner



Most Useful or Valuable Aspect

Attendees were asked what aspects of the programs they attended were most useful or valuable to their horticulture practice. Most found that the programs helped them learn about sustainable horticulture and how to introduce these practices to their clients with care.

- **Sustainable plant care:** Eight felt that they learned more about plants and that programs they attended taught them about sustainable practices for plant care (e.g., soil and water mitigation, water conservation, insect management, limiting invasive plant species use). Most said the programs gave them good examples of techniques to use in their practices, and one added that they have been using resources from the program (e.g., Doug Tallamy's "Bringing Nature Home") in their discussions with clients and their local community to "remind them of the importance of biodiversity."
- **Great Instructors:** Four shared positive feedback about program instructors being informative and pushing them to think more about sustainable practices. One who participated in a Resilient Landscapes section shared how the quality instructors made them "excited for the next class" even though "most of them aren't related." Another said they enjoyed interacting with the instructors and appreciated that they were "willing to take the time to converse and give feedback [on horticulture practices]." One, who had attended programs pre-pandemic, added that they value in-person experiences where instructors can work with students outdoors to "explore the wild" in context, over "sitting in a classroom and seeing a slideshow."
- **Meeting others:** Two were glad to meet other program participants, and thought it was "a really good way to build community." One, a business owner, said it was "useful" to hear how other program attendees were pursuing water conservation and limiting pests.

“

[Attending the program on native plants] made me really want to teach my clients more and not just go along with what they want, but try to give them a little more education and move them towards being more sustainable. And let's face it, rich people really don't care about being that sustainable most of the time. They want it, and they want it now. But it's like, how [can I] sort of gently move them into a better direction was very helpful.

- Professional Landscaper, Business Owner

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New Information on Sustainable Practices

Attendees were asked if they learned anything about sustainable practices in horticulture that was new to them, and many were surprised by the number of new practices they were introduced to through attending the programs.

- **Native plants and garden care:** Four learned about native plants in Maine, how to incorporate them into gardens, the importance of pollinator gardens, and “being less hands-on” in the garden. One professional said they “knew nothing about the native world and native concepts,” and called the lesson on native plants “fantastic.”
- **Soil-use:** Three mentioned soil health, soil layering, and hardscaping. One professional thought about how they could better incorporate hardscaping into their planting practices and garden designs. Another professional discovered that rototilling their garden is not beneficial for the soil’s carbon cycle.
- **Water management:** Two talked about water management and rainwater collection. One non-professional mentioned that they already had some knowledge about water erosion affecting sidewalks and drainage ditches. However, they added that the program enhanced their understanding, taught them effective ways to combat it, and provided a higher level of knowledge that they didn’t have before.
- **No new info:** One, a non-professional who attended the program ‘Edible Wild and Native Plants,’ felt that they knew a great deal about sustainability already and didn’t learn anything new from attending the program. They added that the instructors still did “a great job” teaching the program.

“

It’s really easy just to think, okay, I am going to mulch this garden every year because then it looks nice, but really, you’re better off letting nature do some of the work. Trying to be a little less hands-on sometimes, and that’s really hard for me, but that was sort of a good thing to really think about.

- Professional Landscape Contractor, Business Owner

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Effect on Horticulture Practice or Business

Attendees were asked if the program helped them think about their horticulture practice or business differently than before attending. All said the programs helped inspire or influence a shift to their horticulture practices in response to the changing environmental and economic climate in some way.

- **Change in approach:** Six said attending programs has changed their mindset on how to approach landscaping by helping them think more about sustainable practices and understand the latest techniques that both professionals and hobbyists are using. For example, one shared that they used to think of their landscaping career as “doing work for the customer,” but since attending programs, they have shifted towards “creating gardens and landscapes for the ecosystem.” Another, a non-professional, shared how learning about soil erosion, water mitigation, and forest edge helped them think about how to make improvements to their practices in their private garden.
- **Persuading clients:** Four talked about how the programs have helped them figure out how to address their clients in an informative, “friendly manner” when having discussions about including more native plants in client landscape designs. One gave an example of how they were able to convince a client to plant an entire strip of wild meadow filled with native plants for pollinators alongside her property line, saying “I explained why it’s beneficial and she loves the idea.”

“

My farming frame of mind was you go into a space, and you completely manipulate it to be what you need it to be for the crops. Whereas now, I walk into a space and I think “What is already here and how can I incorporate my design?”...It’s really working with the space instead of working against the space, which is how I was initially trained in the landscape.

- Professional Landscape Designer, Business Owner

”

Building a Network

Attendees were asked if they connected with others during or after attending programs. A few said participating in a program helped them connect or network amongst a community of peers with a shared interest.

- **Connected with others:** Four connected with other attendees after attending a program. Two shared that they were talking with fellow participants in the Green Spotlight Series to place group orders for native wildflowers and plants.
- **Could potentially connect:** Four said they collected other attendees' information or shared their own (email, business card, etc.), but they haven't reached out to or communicated with anyone.
- **Did not connect:** Two did not make an attempt to connect with others. A couple cited the difficulty of attending programs over Zoom and not being able to meet other attendees in-person.

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I feel like if it had been in-person, it certainly would've been more helpful to make those connections. It was over Zoom, so that's limiting. I can't say I have reached out to any of the people who were in that class since then, but I did write down a couple of people's names who were in my area, and I saw them as potential resources. So, I could see it happening.

- Non-professional Horticulturalist

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Recommendations for Improvement

Attendees were asked if there was anything about the programs that they would change to improve them. Some suggested program improvements or voiced personal desires.

- **Course content:** Four had suggestions related to course content. Three suggested the course content did not align with their expectations. For example, one professional said the program they attended was not “attuned towards a landscaper” and was more for hobbyists. Another professional who works in central Maine said the program they attended focused on coastal plants, which was not relevant for his region. A third professional who attended a program on native plants felt that the instructor was not responsive to the fact that landscape professionals have to appease their clients and can’t solely plant native plants. Finally, one non-professional gardener wanted to see more online programs focused on approaches they could implement at a “residential scale” in their garden.
- **Program format recommendations:** Two had recommendations for improving the remote and in-person program formats. For remote programs, one suggested building in breaks and discussion times to keep the lessons from getting off-topic. For in-person programs, one wondered if CMBG could help connect attendees who live far away to overnight accommodations to reduce the travel burden.
- **Adjust program schedule:** Two would like to see adjustments made to program scheduling. One wanted the program offerings scheduled as series with related topics, suggesting that participants could build on related knowledge if the courses were closer together rather than one-offs. Another suggested offering more classes in the fall and winter, saying “[classes are] loaded fairly heavily March into April, which by then I’m in a different place and ramping up for my work year.”
- **Online instructor evaluations:** One said they would prefer filling out instructor evaluation forms online to avoid the discomfort or awkwardness of filling them out in front of the instructors.



Sometimes the classes are multi-day classes [and] by the time you drive to the gardens, you might have traveled an hour and a half or two hours. Then, you have a full day of class, and [afterwards]...you would have to come back the next day, or you'd have to stay somewhere, which can be costly.

- Professional Landscape Consultant and Ecologist



Future Plans to Attend

Attendees were asked if they planned to take another program with CMBG in the future and what their motivations were.

- **Yes:** Nine said they would potentially attend another program, depending on several motivating factors:
 - **Schedule:** Four said would be interested in taking another course on a topic of interest, especially if it is offered in the fall or winter when their professional schedule is lighter in the off-season.
 - **Enjoyable:** Three said they simply enjoy attending programs at CMBG and are always satisfied with what they learn in the programs.
 - **Instructor:** Two said they are more likely to return for a program with an instructor they enjoyed or that is well-known in the field.
 - **Cohort:** One shared that they enjoy being in classes with the same group of people who they've worked together and networked with, and that helps motivate them to keep returning for programs.
- **Not sure:** One non-professional said they had a very specific interest in one program and couldn't say if they planned to take another program.



I felt like they are striking the right balance in terms of who they're catering to. At least, in these [programs] around professional people in landscaping and professional horticulture where they're skipping the broad level introductory stuff that just doesn't need to be covered at this point. I feel like they know who they're trying to cater to, at least in the ones I took, so I can trust that I'm not going to be wasting my time.

- Non-professional Horticulturalist



04 Appendix



Appendix A: Interview Guide

Summative Evaluation Interview Guide

Thanks for taking the time to speak with me today. We will be talking about your experience participating in a program at Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens this year. I want to start by letting you know I do not work at Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens. I work for a company called Kera Collective which helps museums, botanic gardens, and other organizations better understand their audiences and their experiences. I tell you this because I want you to feel comfortable being honest in your feedback today.

I'm going to be audio-recording our conversation for my notes. Is that okay with you? [If yes, start recording. If no, type notes].

1. Can you start by describing your relationship to the landscape and horticulture field?
2. Tell me about which program(s) you have participated in at the Coastal Maine Botanical Garden.
3. What motivated you to participate in this program? What did you hope to get out of your experience in the program?
4. What about this program was most useful or valuable for your horticulture practice? Tell me more about that.
5. What, if anything, about this program raised questions for you or piqued your interest to learn more about sustainable practices in horticulture?
6. What, if anything, did you learn about sustainable practices in horticulture that was new to you? Can you think of an example of that?
7. In what ways, if any, did the program help you think about your own horticulture practice or business differently than you did before the program?
 - a. Can you share an example of something you learned from the program that you were able to apply to your own horticulture practice [or business]? Tell me more about that.

- b. Can you share an example of a shift or change you've made in your business practice or professional focus in response to something you learned from the program? Tell me more about that.

- 8. How, if at all, did the program help you connect with a community of people with a shared interest in horticulture? In what ways did you connect with others during or after the program?

- 9. What about this program would you change to improve it? Tell me more about that.

- 10. Do you plan to take another program with Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in the future?
 - a. [If yes] What about your experience makes you want to come back for another course?

 - b. [If no] Tell me more about why you wouldn't be interested in another program at Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens.

- 11. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens that I didn't ask you about?

Great! We will send [the link to select your \$25 gift card] or [your membership information] to the email you used to schedule this interview. Is that okay? You should receive the link within 2-3 business days. If you don't get the link, please let me know and I can look into it for you!

With gratitude, Kera Collective thanks Coastal Maine Botanical Garden for the opportunity to help its Advanced Studies program move forward.

Our doors are always open—don't hesitate to reach out with anything that's on your mind!

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Kera Collective explores, measures, and furthers the meaning-making that occurs between museums and people.

WWW.KERACOLLECTIVE.COM

HELLO@KERACOLLECTIVE.COM

