

2025
Impact
Report





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Visioning

*A Word From Executive Director,
Drake Fowler*

2025 was a year dedicated to restoration, culminating in the successful launch of *Thomas Dambo's Trolls: A Field Study*. This exhibit shattered all previous visitation records. One afternoon, while exploring the trails, I noticed a family with two young children who were eagerly asking their parents questions. It was clear this was likely their first family hike in the woods. At the heart of our mission is the desire to forge a magical connection between our visitors and the mountains of North Carolina. I hope all our members feel a sense of ownership for this place, which belongs to the public. Creative exhibits like *Trolls* help us cultivate these enchanting connections.

Looking ahead, we have ambitious plans. Our Education Center Plaza is in dire need of renovation to better accommodate our education programs and the many guests we welcome. Conserving the incredible biodiversity of Western North Carolina will continue to be a top priority. We are committed to not only collecting seeds and caring for rare native plants, but also to establishing a garden that educates visitors on the importance of these plants and the need for stewardship. We aspire to be the go-to destination for experiencing and learning about these fascinating plants and ecosystems. The realization of these dreams relies on the support of our members and donors. Together, we can protect, conserve, and preserve The North Carolina Arboretum for generations to come.

Drake Fowler, Executive Director



Drake Fowler and Vic Isley, President & CEO, Explore Asheville, at the press conference announcing *Trolls: A Field Study* at the Arboretum.

“From a 400+ acre parcel of raw land permitted to the Arboretum in 1986 to the vibrant and constantly growing entity it has become is testament to the vision of the legislature, the university system, and the boards; but much more importantly the dedicated hard work of the leadership team, the staff, and the volunteers.”

*- Bill Sword,
Founding Board Member*



Who We *Are*

Plant stories are people stories. The heart of the Arboretum is the people who bring the mission to life across our 434 acres. There are more than 675,000 annual guests, members, partners, students, and visitors that come through the front gate each year. The welcoming of those visitors would not be possible without the dedicated staff and volunteers.

Mission:

Advancing our state's future by creatively connecting people, plants and places through education, design and economic development.

The North Carolina Arboretum is:

Staff

Volunteers

State Board of Directors

Society Board of Directors

University of North Carolina System Affiliate



L: Members of the horticulture team celebrate the spring planting of the Quilt Garden.
R: Volunteers staff the membership table at Arbor Evenings.



Special guests are measured by Birch, one of the twelve Trolls featured in Thomas Dambo's *Trolls: A Field Study* exhibit.

By the *Numbers*



55 FULL TIME STAFF

95 PART-TIME / SEASONAL STAFF



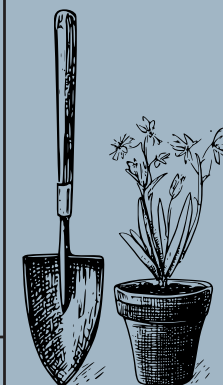
20,000+ MEMBER HOUSEHOLDS



1,280+
PHILANTHROPIC
DONORS



675,000+
VISITORS



15,000+
VOLUNTEER
HOURS

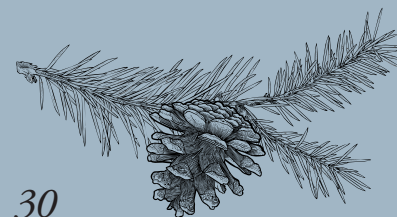
360+
VOLUNTEERS



100,000+
EDUCATION PARTICIPANTS



19 GRANTORS



30
CORPORATE SPONSORS

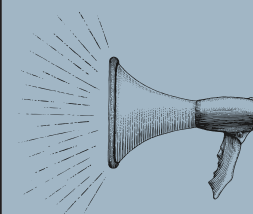
48,000+
NEWSLETTER
SUBSCRIBERS



81,000+
SOCIAL MEDIA
FOLLOWERS



600,000+
WEBSITE VISITORS





Growing *Education*

The North Carolina Arboretum offers year-round educational programs and learning experiences for adults, families, youth, school groups, and trade professionals that focus on environmental sustainability, art, science and economic development.

Youth Education Highlights

- 100,000+ observations submitted by ecoEXPLORE participants of wild plants, animals and fungi to the iNaturalist online network since 2016.
- 126 teachers and 5,096 students from 64 schools engaged through Project EXPLORE's weekly outdoor community science programs aligned with the NC Standard Course of Study, resulting in 25,000+ hours of outdoor learning.
- Project PEACE delivered programming for 367 students from 13 community organizations including Project Lighten Up at Rockhill Missionary Baptist Church, Stephens Lee Community Center, Latinos Adventureros, Cherokee Central Schools, and Transylvania Boys and Girls Club.
- 235 Title 1 middle school students participated in free freshwater ecology field trips.
- Hosted 4,000+ students across NC, SC, and TN for field trip programming aligned with the NC Standard Course of Study.
- Distributed EXPLORE packs to 10 teachers serving 250 students, empowering families to engage in self-directed outdoor science at home.
- Expanded Discovery Camps, engaging 561 campers in learner-driven experiences.
- Mentored 17 EXPLOREcorps high school volunteers who served as role models across 28 summer camps, contributing 1,243 hours of leadership.
- Mountain Science Expo engaged 1,285+ youth and adults from 48 zip codes. Participants interacted with 27 STEM organizations, 22 scientists, and 15 STEM professionals.

Adult Education Highlights

- 200+ programs offered, investigating natural history and ecology, horticulture, arts in nature, and wellness.
- Engaged 65+ instructors in Adult Education Programs: Arboretum staff, local and regional scientists, naturalists, gardeners, artists, authors and more.
- Reached 2,500+ adult students on-site and in the field.
- Increased accessibility to classes by reducing costs, offering scholarships to students, and scheduling more weekend classes.

L: Students participate in a Project PEACE (Promoting Environmental Awareness through Community Engagement) afterschool program. Project PEACE engages underserved communities in environmental education programming to encourage inquiry-based exploration in a welcoming environment.



Donor, member and volunteer support helps us *Grow.*

Conservation

The North Carolina Arboretum's dedication to conservation and stewardship of our region's plant biodiversity is at the forefront of our horticulture program.

National Native Azalea Collection

The Native Azalea Collection is an 8-acre woodland landscape dedicated to the conservation of North America's deciduous *Rhododendron* species. As a nationally recognized collection by the American Public Garden Association, the Collection represents nearly every species native to the United States.



Led by Curator Carson Ellis, the Native Azalea Collection began the year addressing flood and wind damage caused by Hurricane Helene. The Collection reopened to the public in April for its third annual Native Azalea Day Celebration, welcoming guests for a day of live music, guided garden tours, and hands-on activities. Visitors also received a first look at the Collection's newly completed Master Plan and Visioning documents, developed in collaboration with Osgood Landscape Architecture, Inc.

As the Collection continues to grow, both as a conservation plant collection and an educational exhibit, climate-resilient and ecology-focused design will ensure that this garden continues to thrive.



The Collection team collaborated with land trusts, universities, private landowners, and state and federal organizations, to make collection trips across four states, resulting in:

- 143 seed and softwood cutting accessions of unique lineages collected, representing 25 azalea populations and 12 azalea species.
- Collection of the SC endemic May white azalea (*Rhododendron eastmanii*) and the rare plumleaf azalea (*Rhododendron prunifolium*).

The construction of a new Azalea Shed expanded the Conservation Nursery, providing a dedicated growing space for native species including:

- 400 azaleas, representing 46 maternal lineages and 12 *Rhododendron* species.
- 122 seedlings of *Nabalus asper*, an imperiled TN wildflower, sent for outplanting with collaborator, Tennessee Plant Conservation Alliance.

L: New Native Azalea propagation facility at the Greenhouse. R: Curator Carson Ellis shares the Collection's new Master Plan with guests at Native Azalea Day. Native Azalea propagation growing in the propagation facility.



Philanthropy

Legacy Trust

Planned gifts, whether large or small, reflect a lasting and forward-looking sentiment, ensuring that future generations will continue to experience the Arboretum's impact in perpetuity.

In 2025, we welcomed 15 households into the Arboretum's new *Legacy Trust*.



- 2025 Signed Legacy Gifts totaling \$4,107,442.00
- 2025 Newly Established Endowments:
 - B. Speciale Endowment*
 - Consuelo's Community Access Endowment*
 - Darnell Family Endowment for Adult Education*
 - Francee Healy Endowment*
 - Stitzinger/Humphreys Endowment for Gardens & Education*

Membership

Membership support is an important source of funding for The North Carolina Arboretum Society, with the peak reaching 20,000+ member households in 2025. An Arboretum Membership comes with level-associated benefits, from Individual to Benefactor, such as early access to events and the reciprocal network of 300+ gardens across the United States.

Philanthropic Gifts

Those who choose to donate above and beyond Arboretum membership set a philanthropic example that reflects advocacy and dedication to advancing the organization's mission and vision. The Arboretum thrives because of its donors, making it possible to serve as a leader in connecting people with the biodiversity of the Southern Appalachian Mountains and beyond.

75%
Private Funds



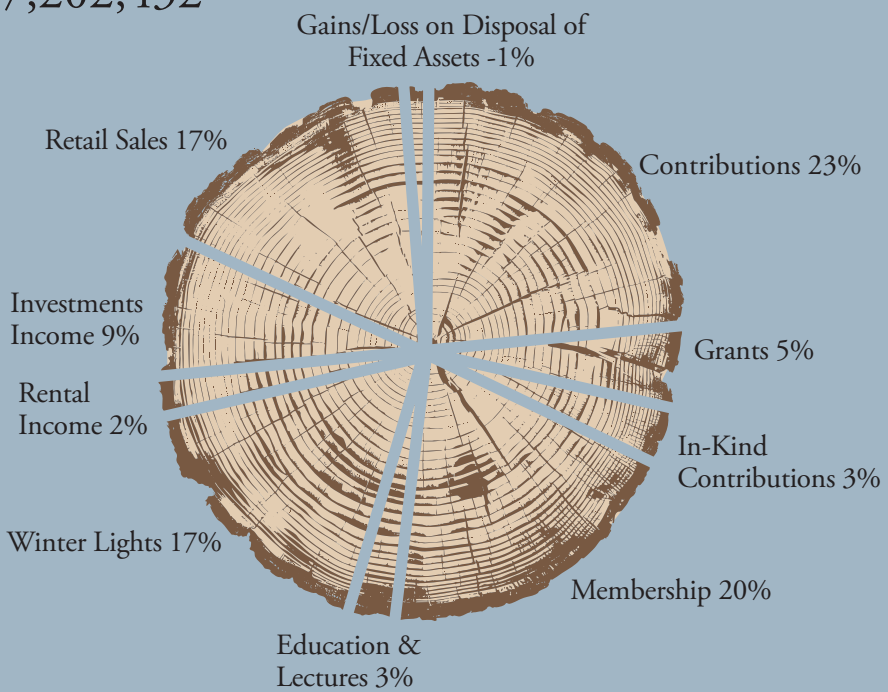
25%
State Funds



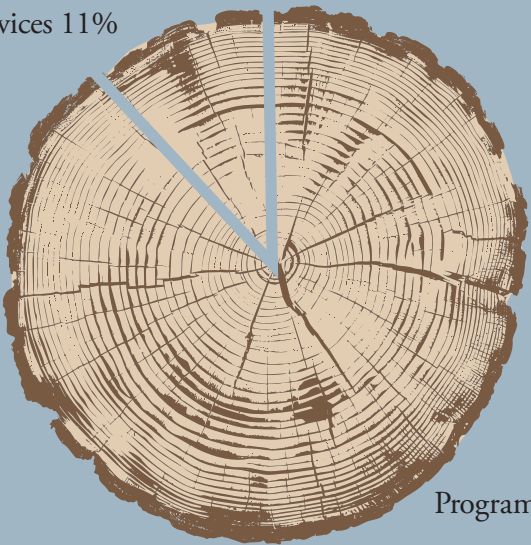
North Carolina State Auditor Dave Boliek (middle) presents The Cardinal Award to The North Carolina Arboretum Chief Financial Officer Stephanie Lee (left) for her exceptional leadership in managing FEMA documentation and ensuring financial accountability during recovery efforts following Hurricane Helene. The North Carolina Arboretum Executive Director Drake Fowler pictured right.

2024-2025 *Financials*

Total Revenue & Support
\$7,202,432*



Support Services 11%



Total Expenses
\$6,456,908

* Revenue reflects restricted Hurricane Helene Funds.



North Carolina students participate in Project EXPLORE (Experience Promoting Learning Outdoors for Research and Education), a free, community science-driven school outreach initiative developed by the Arboretum that provides outdoor education techniques for teachers.

Partners in the *Field*

New and ongoing relationships with corporate and foundation supporters in 2025 helped to enrich the lives of Arboretum members, visitors, and education participants and to restore our forests, educational spaces, and gardens in recovery from Hurricane Helene.

In 2025 our 30 corporate partners donated \$438,491.00 in cash and in-kind services, while 19 grantors awarded \$575,000.00 to support our programs, projects, and events. Expanded sponsorship opportunities like *Trolls: A Field Study*, *Spring into the Arb!*, and *Fall for the Arb!* contributed to the growth of the Community Partners program this year.

2025 Corporate Community Partners

AvL Technologies	K2 Services, Inc.
Bartlett Tree Experts	Lamar Advertising Asheville
B.B. Barns	LocaliQ/USA Today Network
Biltmore Farms	Mosaic Community Lifestyle Realty
Biltmore Park Town Square	Oldcastle APG
Blue Ridge Public Radio	Our State
Camilla Calnan Photography	Publix Super Markets Charities
Carolina Living Choices	Reems Creek Nursery
Clark Communications	RomanticAsheville.com
Faith Doyle, CPA Baird	Smoky Mountain Living
Fred Anderson Subaru	Southeastern Container
Gasperson Moving & Storage	Spectrum Reach
Gray Line Trolley Tours of Asheville	ThermoFisher Scientific
Henco North Creative Imaging	VEG ER For Pets Asheville
Highland Brewing Company	Weller at The Preserve
iHeartMedia Asheville	WithersRavenel

Active Grantors

ArtsAVL	North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences
Community Foundation of Western North Carolina	North Carolina Science Festival
Dogwood Health Trust	North Carolina Science Network
Duke Energy Foundation	Pisgah Investments Foundation
Ecology Wildlife Foundation	Rotary Club of Asheville
Explore Asheville Powered By Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority	Walnut Cove Members Association
French Broad River Garden Club Foundation	Wells Fargo Foundation
Glass Foundation	Western North Carolina Disaster Relief Fund of the Community Foundation of Henderson County, Inc
The Laura Jane Musser Fund	Others not listed for anonymity purposes
North Carolina GlaxoSmithKline Foundation	



Engagement

Engaging the community through events, exhibits, weddings, garden parties, and more is one of the many ways The North Carolina Arboretum brings its mission to life—connecting people with plants and places. Regardless of which department leads the effort, the Arboretum strives to be welcoming, inclusive, and accessible, enriching lives and making a meaningful difference throughout the community and region.

Engagement Opportunities of 2025:

Adult Education Classes & Lectures

American Chestnut Day

Annual Garden Party

Annual Plant Sales

Arbor Day Celebration

Arbor Evenings

Asheville Orchid Festival

Bird Day

Bonsai Garden 20th Anniversary

Echoes of the Forest

Exhibits

Fall for the Arb!

Founder's Day

Halloween Dog Parade

Monarch Butterfly Day

Mountain Music Day

Mountain Science Expo

Native Azalea Day

Nature Play Day

Spring into the Arb!

Trail Day

Trolls: A Field Study

Weddings and Facility Rentals

Winter Lights

World Bonsai Day

Youth Education Camps & Activities

And more!



Restoration & Reforestation

Walking through our damaged forests after Hurricane Helene was a heartbreaking experience for Arboretum staff and our community members. As we continue to remove fallen trees and put them to good use through partnerships with Echoes of the Forest and the UNCA STEAM Lab, we can see what remains standing. Sunlight is now reaching the forest floor for the first time in 50 to 100 years, and we believe we are on the cusp of an amazing opportunity.

How can we turn the loss of 10,000 trees into a chance to help nature reshape these places into environments that will further diversify the types of ecosystems in our patch of forest? Moreover, how can we become a learning laboratory for the greater reforestation of Western North Carolina? The Arboretum is working with EcoForesters and NC State University to create a plan to do just that.



L: Mac Franklin, Director of Horticulture, stands next to the stump of a tree toppled by Hurricane Helene.
R: *Topographical Bench* made of reclaimed wood by artist Chester Shuey through the Echoes of the Forest partnership.
NC Senator Warren Daniel and NC Governor Josh Stein plant a white oak tree (*Quercus alba*) on Arbor Day.

Looking *Ahead*

In 2026, The North Carolina Arboretum is celebrating our 40th anniversary. A significant milestone for a garden, and certainly a moment worth stopping to reflect on how far we have come, then turning to look ahead and dream about where we are headed. It is a time to honor the leaders, members, volunteers, and staff who have invested so much to bring The North Carolina Arboretum to what it is today.

The Arboretum has exciting new plans for the gardens that will significantly impact the next generation of youth, as well as celebrate and conserve the biodiversity of the Southern Appalachian Mountains. We will strengthen our endowments to ensure the ongoing care and stewardship of this place for many generations. We invite you to get involved in a way that is meaningful for you – whether as a volunteer, member, donor, guest, or friend and enjoy this incredible place that is filled with wonder.



1986 • THE • 2026
**NORTH CAROLINA
ARBORETUM**

Connect With Us in 2026

- Would you like to discover more about The North Carolina Arboretum?
- Would you like to get to know our Executive Director?
- Would you like to join us for a Behind-the-Scenes Tour?
- Would you like to hear about future planned improvements to the property?
- Would you like to learn more about the ONE Fund or Legacy Trust?

If so, a member of our Development Team would be happy to arrange a visit or tour for you. Contact us at development@ncarboretum.org or 828-665-2492.

Thank You for supporting The North Carolina Arboretum.





 *The NORTH CAROLINA*
ARBORETUM
SOCIETY

100 Frederick Law Olmsted Way
Asheville, NC 28806