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Garden of wonders for little ones Page D6



Its wheelchair accessible treehouse is one of the highlights of the Hershey Children's Garden in Cleveland which just celebrated its 10th birthday.

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A place of small wonders

Love of nature behind establishment of Hershey Children's Garden, now 10 years old

Debra Guren was slightly astonished when she realized that the children who first visited the Hershey Children's Garden are now old enough to drive.

"So often when I'm there I meet these almost-grown-up people who tell me the garden is their favorite place to go," she said. "It's so much fun to talk with kids who grew up with the garden. Childhood and nature really do go together."

That half-acre children's garden, on the grounds of the Cleveland Botanical Garden in University Circle, celebrated its 10th birthday last week with a garden-wide party for everyone. Guren was there, as she often is, along with many parents and the children for whom the garden has become a part of their lives.

Designed with child-sized spaces, it's a place where imaginations are fueled by impromptu games of hide and seek in a mulberry tree fort, fuzzy lamb's ear leaves to touch, minty plants to taste, a sod-roofed house too big for grown-ups to enter and a treehouse that's even accessible to kids in wheelchairs.

It's clear that kids were consulted in its creation a decade ago.

Guren, who lives in Kirtland Hills, leads the Hershey Foundation, which was begun by her parents and funded the establishment of the garden.

Until she was 12, Guren lived with her family in a house in University Heights that, she said, had a "postage stamp-sized yard." But nearby, at Washington Boulevard and Silsby Road, was a vacant lot where magic reigned. It quickly became her play yard, and she spent hours there every day.

"I caught grasshoppers and praying mantises, and got to know every plant growing there," she recalled. "It was my favorite place to be."

Those early times and her mother's love of gardening shaped her own love of nature and the outdoors.

Her mother, Jo Hershey Selden, named the Cleveland Botanical Garden as a beneficiary when she set up a Charitable Remainder Trust.

Thanks to the Hershey family's successful insurance business, Jo Hershey Selden also established the Hershey Foundation, dedicating it to providing Northeast Ohio children from all backgrounds with opportunities for personal growth and development.

From that Foundation, the Hershey Montessori School in Concord Township and its Farm School in Huntsburg Township, were also established. Debra Guren and her siblings administer the Hershey Foundation.

As a Montessori education advocate,



Molly Gisel, 3, of Cleveland uses a pretty pink watering can to water a container of flowers during the 10th birthday celebration of the Hershey Children's Garden.

Details

- Hershey Children's Garden
- Open April 1 to Oct. 31
- Admission: \$7.50 adults; \$3 children 3 through 12; free for younger children
- Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday
- noon to 5 p.m. Sundays
- Cleveland Botanical Garden
- 11030 East Blvd.
- University Circle
- (216) 721-1600

Guren believes strongly in the effectiveness of hands-on learning.

Thus, very early in the planning process for the Hershey Children's Garden it was decided there would no overly designed, manicured or inauthentic spaces.

It wasn't to be an outdoor museum

where kids press a buzzer and quickly move on to the next buzzer. Designers weren't seeking cute, and they weren't looking for gimmicks.

So they designed a garden that's a little wild around the edges with places for kids to discover for themselves.

Six weeping mulberry trees with lush curtains of branches form a complex of forts perfect for playing hide and seek. A grassy hill in front of the mulberries was created for toddlers to happily roll down and become dizzy.

Children love laying on their stomachs on the dock at the pond to spot gold fish, frogs and tadpoles.

There's a squirting fountain to play in, a bird blind for sneaking up on birds, a rock climbing wall and concrete pathways with animal tracks imbedded along their

length.

Like other gardens, the Hershey Children's Garden changes through the season. Spring's daffodils, tulips and fragrant hyacinths give way to the early summer theatrics of foxglove, peonies, astilbes and lavender.

Soon they relinquish attention to catnip, black-eyed Susans, coneflowers and hibiscus and, as autumn comes, to Japanese anemones, red pineapple sage and towering purple Joe Pye weed. Plant material in the children's garden includes vegetables, so kids can see where their food comes from, and lots of native plants.

Girl Scouts were invited to paint pictures of the plants and write their names on small wooden labels so other children could learn the plant names.

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Wonders

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While in search of a hemlock tree at Losely Nursery in Perry Township, garden planners discovered two larch trees that had formed a perfect arch.

They bought them and created the enchanting Larch Arch entry to the woodland garden.

Child-sized entry gates bear likenesses of beetles and a praying mantis. Peepholes, handles, hand pumps for water arbors and garden seats also are child-sized.

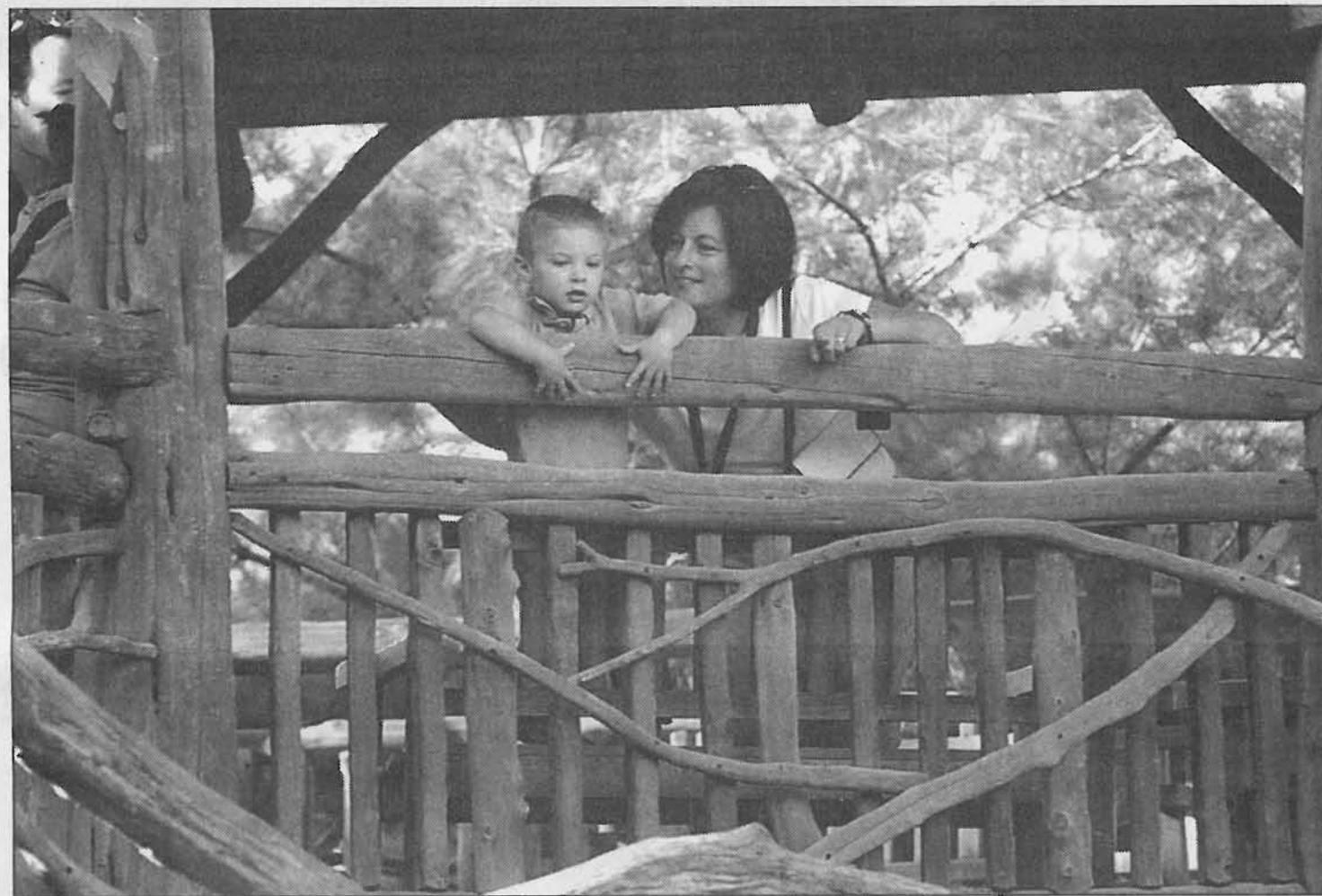
"Having things to scale for the size of the child has always been a key for us. But when they put in the little house, it was too big," Guren recalled. "So they cut 18 inches off the bottom to make it just for kids. I've seen kids in there for hours."

Every week she spends time working anonymously as a docent in the children's garden.

"Some people drive more than an hour to get here," she said. "Grandparents love to bring their grandchildren here."

Just as her early influences were plants and flowers in the outdoors, so has the Hershey Children's Garden influenced her own now-grown children.

"My own son helped us do the research," Guren said. "He was a real kid who was telling me what



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Debra Guren of Kirtland Hills points out features of the Hershey Children's Garden to her young cousin, Dylan Hershey, 2.

kids like and what they don't like."

Her son Zach, youngest of her two boys, now is studying environmental science and urban planning at Penn State University.

Daughter Sara is a photographer living in Gates Mills, and her other son, Adam, is in invest-

ment banking in New York City. Today, Guren is surrounded by gardens at her Lake County home, which has 33 acres of woods.

"We've lived here 15 years, and I love working outdoors," she said. "I collect perennials, have a vegetable garden, a small rose garden and a woodland gar-

den. I even enjoy figuring out what the deer will and won't eat."

She's accustomed to being asked about her relationship to the candy bar Hershey family. "We are not related," she said. "If I had the Hershey candy fortune I'd build gardens like this all over the country."