



Cultivating Our Future

2022–2027 Strategic Plan

MOUNTAIN TOP
ARBORETUM



**We aspire daily to
delight, inspire and
educate our visitors**

(Cover) Striped maple seeds photo by Rob Cardillo. (Above) East Meadow Boardwalk photo by Marc Wolf. (Below left) Leaf drawing by Thorneater.

INTRODUCTION

*“What I stand for is what I
stand on.”*

– Wendell Berry

Welcome to the Mountain Top Arboretum’s 2022–2027 Strategic Plan clarifying our mission and outlining our near-term goals and aspirations.

This document reflects (in summary form) the hard work, communal thinking, and dedication of the Mountain Top Arboretum’s Board, led by Abby Coffin, and its Staff, led by Marc Wolf, guided by consultant Marci Sternheim, over the course of

two years and through the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic. This document also incorporates input from many stakeholders and we are indebted to our members, donors and greater community for their generosity during this process.

Since its founding, the Mountain Top Arboretum has grown and expanded dramatically. In writing this plan, we reflect on our past and our legacy. Born of a singular vision, our arboretum has become the dynamic creation of many visionaries. Now into its fifth decade, the Mountain Top Arboretum continues to energetically evolve, and our goal with this plan is to drive the Mountain Top Arboretum forward boldly and thoughtfully to assure the organization’s long-term success and sustainability.



(Left to right) Foraged Wildflower Arrangements program photo by Cookie Brindle, Interior of timber frame Education Center photo by Rob Cardillo, West Meadow White Ash and Gazebo photo by Rob Cardillo.

Our plan responds to challenges and opportunities and inspires us to act on them while maintaining our highest standards of excellence.

The Catskills history, landscape, and people define the Mountain Top Arboretum. Its unique location and curated beauty reveal a remarkable abundance of natural diversity that cannot be captured in a single visit. A first introduction to the Arboretum creates curiosity and compels visitors to come back again and again to explore its timeless and soul-inspiring power. Our charge, then, is not only to steward this exceptional place but also to make sure that it is well-shared and fully-experienced.

Therefore, everything we do emanates from our land and benefits our community from near and far. We model excellent horticultural practices;

we demonstrate environmental stewardship at the highest level; we educate through facts, creativity, collaboration, and best practices; and we welcome everyone into all the experiences that the Mountain Top Arboretum has to offer. Our work is a circle of cultivation, conservation, education, and engagement with the overarching goal of inspiration. This plan reveals, celebrates, and continually returns to the idea of deep interconnectedness – of place and people; of local landscape to a larger region; of past to present and future; of nature and ourselves – in the hope of inspiring a sustained connection to the Mountain Top Arboretum and an enduring commitment to all that we represent.

Just as this plan reflects the Mountain Top Arboretum’s singular location and history, it also embeds our current beliefs, values, and culture as it anticipates

a rich future of overlapping and intersecting ideas, aspirations, goals, and program priorities. While we are local and regional in organizational scope, our botanical science and environmental knowledge have implications that reach far beyond the mountain top. Therefore, our four program areas, which complement and reinforce each other, toggle between a micro-view of stewarding and sharing the riches of the Arboretum and a macro-view of engaging



*Work in the Spiral Labyrinth.
Photo by Marc Wolf.*

our Catskill region and beyond:

- **Horticulture** cares for the Arboretum’s 178 acres of trees, shrubs, herbaceous plants, meadows, wetlands, woodlands and forest that are the heart and soul of our organization. We use everything on our property as the impetus for creating all the other programming and initiatives suggested in this plan.
- **Environmental Stewardship and Advocacy (ES&A)** contextualizes our immediate landscape within the larger ecosystem of the Catskills and the national and global concerns about climate change and environmental degradation. Even as we preserve, protect and enhance our own land, we are aware of our stewardship obligations to the larger environment around us.
- **Education** develops original programming – based on our landscape and our larger Catskill ecosystem as well as through partnerships with universities,

research centers, environmental colleagues, and local arts and culture organizations – that takes the greatest advantage of our scientific and environmental knowledge, our history, our unique landscape, and the Arboretum’s myriad pleasures and treasures.

- **Community Engagement and Outreach (CE&O)** seeks to understand our audiences, build our membership, encourage volunteerism, seek out affinities, and develop partnership opportunities. Through broad outreach efforts, CE&O upholds our commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and access by welcoming all into our beautiful landscape to participate in the enriching programming and inspirational experiences we offer.

Our plan captures what we do best and identifies what more we can do given the right conditions and resources. Excellent stewardship – of our land, our community, our region, and our organization – is our highest priority as we cultivate our future.



Native Tree Trail tour photo by Cookie Brindle

STORY OF SUCCESS: Our Emerald Bog



Just what is it that makes our bog special? When forest historian Dr. Michael Kudish probed the depths of our Emerald Bog, he recorded peat over *eleven* feet deep and radiocarbon dated a peat core sample to 14,900 years old, making Emerald Bog one of the oldest recorded bogs in the Catskills. From that and other core samples we can learn about the forest history going back to the last Ice Age.

The preservation of bogs is essential to the health of our planet. Meter for meter, bogs store more

carbon than any other ecosystem. Even though they cover only 3% of the Earth’s surface, bogs hold half of the atmosphere’s carbon or CO₂. Bogs also play a valuable role by filtering water, preventing runoff and mitigating flooding. The Emerald Bog helps protect waters that flow into Sawmill Creek, one of the headwater streams of the New York City watershed system that delivers drinking water to 9,000,000 people downstate.

Protecting our land and engaging visitors with our stewardship work are paramount goals at the Mountain Top Arboretum. We sought and received a grant from the Schoharie Watershed Advisory Committee to build an access boardwalk in order to preserve and share this fragile ecosystem. The boardwalk and accompanying interpretive sign tell visitors the bog’s long history and its importance to our community.

*“The arboretum walk was unforgettable...
I don’t think I’ll ever walk through the woods
the same again. Can’t wait to go back with
the kids sometime to share it with them.”*

—James R.



Emerald Bog photos by Jon Daniel (top) and Marc Wolf.



Our work is a circle of cultivation, conservation, education and engagement with the overarching goal of inspiration.

(Above) Volunteers and Staff plant native groundcovers in the Conifer Berms. Photo by Alexandra Prince. (Below left) Leaf drawing by Thorneater

BACKGROUND

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

— Margaret Mead

The Mountain Top Arboretum today is the result of the disciplined commitment of many visionaries over the last forty-five years. The Mountain Top Arboretum was founded in 1977 by Peter and Bonnie Ahrens, whose summer home overlooked a seven-acre parcel of mountain top

scrubland. Acting on their passion for trees and nature, the Ahrens decided to acquire the land, bring in topsoil and plant trees. As scientific researchers, their idea was to use the mountain top’s rigorous climate at 2,400 feet elevation to study the winter hardiness of different native and exotic species. Over time the Arboretum has grown to 178 acres, an area which includes ecologically important and visually stunning meadows, wetlands and forests. As the Arboretum has grown in size, its commitment to land stewardship has grown as well, both in managing



Red Maple flower photo by Rob Cardillo

the important watershed ecosystem and in curating collections focused on native plant communities and their relationships to environmental health. In addition, the Arboretum began to develop and continues to conduct public programming, lectures and workshops which showcase horticultural excellence, environmental stewardship and appreciation for the beauty and importance of the Catskill Mountains.

In the late summer of 2018, the Mountain Top Arboretum held its first program in its extraordinary timber-frame Education Center, built from twenty-one iconic tree species that are native to the Catskill region and harvested from the Arboretum's site. The building, a visionary achievement of the Board under the leadership of Larry McCaffrey, opened up new possibilities for programming and community outreach, aspirations reinforced



Education Center photo by Rob Cardillo

by the organization's decision to convert from a private foundation to a public charity, signaling an opening up of its outward-facing aspirations. Marc Wolf, appointed Executive Director in 2017, provides professional leadership to the organization. Succeeding Larry, Abby Coffin was newly installed as Board chair and, with these significant changes accomplished, the timing was ideal to create a road map for the organization's growth and development.



Our iconic Education Center and Outdoor Classroom position us to be a leader in Catskill ecosystem education.

(Above) Interior of Education Center photo by Rob Cardillo. (Inset) Educational Programming photo by Marc Wolf



We are committed to the care of the environment, our land, our community, our history and legacy, and the sustainability of our resources

(Above) Musciewood photo by Rob Cardillo. (Inset) Volunteers cleaning native seeds for sowing. Photo by Marc Wolf. (Below) Leaf drawing by Thorneater.



DEVELOPING THIS PLAN

In late 2019, the Mountain Top Arboretum began a several-months long process to develop a Strategic Visioning Retreat, which – delayed for one year because of Covid – finally took place on Zoom over two days in February 2021. The Board and Staff’s rich thought work at that Retreat laid the foundation for this plan, and their dedicated efforts over the last many months has been to take the outcomes of that complex generative process into an inspiring and fully-realized plan. The results of the Board and Staff’s hard work and deep commitment have been summarized into this Strategic Plan, which is intended to guide the Arboretum’s work in the near term and set it up for long-term sustainability and success.

The Board articulated several statements and precepts that have guided our thinking about the Arboretum and our planning efforts on its behalf. We have and will continue to circle back to these to ensure that the goals and strategies of the plan align with our vision, mission, values and culture:

Mountain Top Arboretum’s VISION

We envision a world that respects, cares for, and is curious about environmental diversity, regional history, and natural beauty.

Mountain Top Arboretum’s MISSION

Our mission is to conserve, enhance, and celebrate our distinctive Catskill sanctuary through sustainable horticulture, responsible land stewardship, and innovative educational programming.



(Photos top to bottom) Visitors stroll in West Meadow by Marc Wolf. Winter view of West Meadow by Rob Cardillo. School Field Trip by Alexandra Prince. Red Spruce by Rob Cardillo. Bird Watching program by Marc Wolf.

Mountain Top Arboretum’s CULTURE: Our Values in Action

- **Stewardship:** we are committed to the care of the environment, our land, our community, our history and legacy, and the sustainability of our resources;
- **Education and learning:** we are close observers of the world around us; we seek and share information and knowledge; we respect and rely on scientific expertise; we are active learners, teachers, and reflective listeners;
- **Community engagement:** we care about our community and we are sensitive to its needs; we strive to be good neighbors, to contribute locally and to cultivate both personal and communal enrichment;
- **Collaboration:** we are dedicated and engaged; we invest in relationships; we are passionate, enthusiastic, and appreciative; we are open, approachable, and communicative;
- **Excellence:** we believe in our work; we are strong and innovative problem-solvers; we aspire to the highest standards and integrity in all that we do;
- **Creativity:** we strive to create beauty and to provide pleasure in nature, believing that these are necessary experiences for developing an ecologically-committed community;
- **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Access:** we are committed to making our Arboretum a welcoming, accessible, and inclusive environment for all to enjoy.



**Pursuing excellent stewardship
of our land, our community,
our region, and our organization**

(Above) Eastern Hemlock cones photo by Rob Cardillo. (Below left) Leaf drawing by Thorneater.



OUR PLAN FOR CULTIVATING OUR FUTURE

The plan that follows represents months of intensive thought, creativity, and dedication by the entire Mountain Top Arboretum Board and Executive Director. The broad outlines of this Strategic Plan were developed by the full Board and Staff during its 2021 Strategic Visioning Retreat, facilitated by our consultant. The four Program Area micro-missions, high-level strategic goals, and tactics to fulfill those goals were further elaborated and refined through several months of research and detailed discussions among the various program area committees and with input from the full Board.¹

All of that thoughtful work became the basis for an intensive writing and editing process to arrive at this version of the plan, which synthesizes and refines the dedicated efforts of the whole Mountain Top Arboretum team.

2022 Board of Directors

Abby Coffin, <i>Chair</i>	David Hamar
Robert Kerns, <i>President</i>	Byron Knief
Meg Waldron, <i>Vice President</i>	Arthur Lubow
Pierce Sioussat, <i>Treasurer</i>	Larry McCaffrey
Karen Taggart, <i>Secretary</i>	Dean Riddle
Mermer Blakeslee	Bruce K. Riggs
Nancy de la Selle	Vern Rist
Sydney Frazier	Mary Tynes

Marc Wolf, *Executive Director*

1. Committees developed S.M.A.R.T. grid formats for critical evaluation and success monitoring. Because planning is organic and must be responsive to evolving conditions, mid-course corrections and/or changes are inevitable and will be recorded on those grids.

I. Horticulture

Horticulture is at the heart of our Arboretum. We strive to create and support a landscape that is dynamic and experientially rich, full of beauty layered into a sound ecological approach. Our aesthetic and sensibility evolve along with our



Wildflower program photo by Cookie Brindle

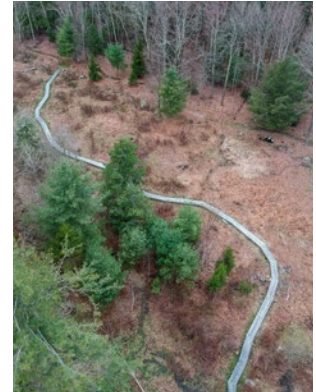
collective knowledge and understanding of best practices. We were founded in the 1970s as an experiment to grow trees from all over the world for cold hardiness, and we continue to curate, cultivate and expand that collection. As the value of regionalism to support tightly knit ecosystems has been recognized, we have responded by growing plant communities native to the Catskills and the northeastern US that we want the public to see, understand, and be inspired to plant in their own gardens and landscapes. To stay on the forefront of horticultural thinking, we continually reevaluate our practices for sustainable stewardship and our solutions grow more complex, situational, and nuanced. We offer our landscape and its diverse plant communities to delight, inspire, and educate our visitors.

Horticulture micro-mission:

To maintain, develop, and enhance our horticultural displays and collections for aesthetic and educational purposes.

Horticulture goals:

1. Through responsible horticulture practices and aesthetically pleasing design, to educate and inspire visitors to garden sustainably and mindfully of environmental health.
2. Manage weeds, pests, disease and invasives using best practices with minimally harmful environmental impact.
3. Maintain and improve plant accessions, labels and signage.
4. Propagate endemic and native plant species of the region.



East Meadow Boardwalk photo by Rob Cardillo



Sugar Maple photo by Rob Cardillo

II. Environmental Stewardship and Advocacy



Sugar Maple photo by Rob Cardillo

The Mountain Top Arboretum enjoys a rare location, and decades of dedicated cultivation and preservation have only served to heighten the beauty and importance of its landscape. Within its 178 acres, the Arboretum has many unique characteristics that are documented in its 2018 Natural Resources Inventory (NRI): forests, meadows, Devonian bedrock outcrops, marshlands, ephemeral pools and bogs support different plant communities and their associated fauna. The Inventory also highlights the Arboretum’s exceptional geologic features, forest history, and its place in the Catskill Watershed, which together with the adjacent Delaware Watershed, supplies drinking water to 9,000,000 New Yorkers downstate. Thus the Arboretum is not simply an island unto itself, but sits within and is inextricably linked to the extraordinary ecosystem of the entire Catskill Mountains region. While we take excellent care of our acreage, we also take very seriously our obligations as stewards and protectors of our greater Catskill environment.

Environmental stewardship and advocacy micro-mission:

To preserve and enhance the health of our distinctive Catskill environment for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Environmental stewardship and advocacy goals:

1. Support regional preservation efforts within the Catskill Watershed.
2. Ensure sustainable access to the Arboretum’s lands.
3. Incorporate ecologically responsible operations and infrastructure with the goal of becoming a Carbon Neutral operation by 2030.



Dr. Michael Kudish records peat core temperatures and leads a program in Emerald Bog. Photos by Marc Wolf.

III. Education

We believe the best way to appreciate the Mountain Top Arboretum is to understand it. The Arboretum’s scientific origins, model gardens, and exceptional natural features offer myriad opportunities for educational programming, and our iconic new Education Center and outdoor classroom position us to be a leader in Catskill ecosystem education. Therefore, it is our job to interpret, explain, and engage audiences and visitors of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities through knowledge-sharing and hands-on activities.



*Story Walk program
photo by Marc Wolf*

Through our educational programs and events, we hope to inspire all of our visitors to become conscientious stakeholders of this special environment and dedicated stewards of the Catskill region and beyond.

Education micro-mission:

Building upon our unique Catskill location and assets, to provide educational programming for a wide range of ages, abilities, and types of learning.

Education goals:

1. Identify, evaluate, and understand the Mountain Top Arboretum programming and audiences.
2. Design and deliver high-quality programming for target audiences.
3. Ensure quality, diversity, and broadest reach of our programming.
4. Provide interpretive signage, maps, and brochures to enhance visitors’ educational experience.
5. Maintain and expand a robust digital presence to deepen our visitors’ educational experience.



East Meadow Boardwalk photo by Marc Wolf

IV. Community Engagement and Outreach

We take seriously our obligation to share this special place with visitors of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities, so we commit to making the Arboretum inclusive and accessible. Through our outreach efforts we want to understand who our audiences are, what communities they represent, what they seek from the Arboretum, and what affinity groups we can attract. As a good citizen of the region, we will encourage reciprocal partnerships and collaborations that strengthen our mutual Catskill identity. We will welcome and train volunteers who can expand our capacity and be our ambassadors. We will cultivate and connect the Arboretum community by sharing all we have to offer through a variety of platforms.

Community engagement and outreach

micro-mission:

Identify and build robust relationships throughout our Catskill community and extend our reach by making the Mountain Top Arboretum broadly accessible to all.

Community engagement and outreach goals:

1. Create a robust survey and data collection program to understand our audiences and visitors.
2. Attract, retain, and broaden our membership, audiences, and visitors.
3. Continue to collaborate with other entities (affiliate organizations, institutions of higher education, garden clubs, arts and cultural organizations) who: align with and/or further the Arboretum mission, provide mutual benefit, maintain the Arboretum's standards of excellence, and enhance the Mountain Top Arboretum Catskill brand.



(Above) School Field Trip photo by Alexandra Prince. (Next page) Winter view of West Meadow photo by Rob Cardillo.

A winter landscape featuring snow-covered trees in the foreground and middle ground, with two rounded mountains in the background under a clear blue sky. The scene is illuminated by soft, golden light, likely from a low sun, creating a serene and peaceful atmosphere. The snow is bright white, and the trees are dark with some frost on their branches.

MOUNTAIN TOP ARBORETUM

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