

# Making your garden **COME ALIVE!**

Environmental Interpretation in Botanical Gardens

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# PREFACE

Interpretation provides the communication link between a botanical garden and its visitors. Some popular forms of interpretation include guided walks, trail brochures and signs. In addition to its educational function, interpretation can be used to promote your organisation and its activities, thereby gaining public support. It is about connecting with visitors and making the garden come alive.

This book provides practical guidelines on how to develop an interpretation programme in a botanical garden. It aims to enthuse and inspire you to communicate with visitors and make your garden a dynamic and exciting place. The examples in this book illustrate the potential for creative low-budget interpretation. For example, most of the design features seen here can be achieved with a simple scanner or photocopier.

This manual is by no means comprehensive: it is based largely on the experience gained by interpretation staff working in the eight National Botanical Gardens (NBGs) in South Africa. During the past five years we have tried a variety of approaches and techniques, and this manual documents much of what we have learnt. Although the examples used here are specific to botanical gardens, the principles of interpretation are equally applicable to nature reserves, national parks and cultural heritage sites.

I wish to express my sincere thanks to staff at the National Botanical Institute with whom I worked from 1994 to 1999. I was very fortunate to work with talented educators, horticulturists, researchers, artists and designers and thank them for sharing their ideas, skills and expertise. In particular, I would like to thank John Roff for being a constant source of inspiration and new insights on interpretation, and sharing so freely of his interpretive techniques. Thanks to Pitta Joffe, Phillip le Roux, John Roff and Sharon Turner for contributing case histories and slides, which helped to make this book come to life.

I would like to acknowledge the Desert Botanic Garden (Phoenix, USA) as a major source of inspiration and ideas. When I visited this garden in 1997, I was so impressed and excited by what I saw, that I returned to Kirstenbosch with renewed enthusiasm. They have kindly given me permission to include examples of their interpretive materials in this book.

Finally I would like to thank Sam Ham for his excellent book on environmental interpretation (publication details on page 92), which introduced me to the concept of thematic interpretation. Once the penny dropped about the importance of using themes, there was simply no turning back.

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# What is Interpretation?

“Not having an interpreter in your garden is like inviting a guest to your house, opening the door and then disappearing.”

– William Carr

“Interpretation is an educational activity that reveals meanings and relationships through the use of original objects and first-hand experiences . . . It is more than simply to communicate facts.”

– Freeman Tilden

Interpretation is the link between your garden and those who visit it. Using interpretation, you can encourage people to explore nature, to learn and get excited about plants and to care about the environment.

Good interpretation is entertaining, informative and provides visitors with a meaningful and enjoyable experience. It capitalises on people’s curiosity and helps them to see relationships rather than simply learning facts. Interpreters can communicate with visitors in a variety of ways including guided walks, slideshows, brochures and interpretive signs.

Interpretation is therefore an approach to communication. Whereas information concerns itself mainly with facts, interpretation attempts to give meaning to something. In this way visitors gain new insights and understanding.

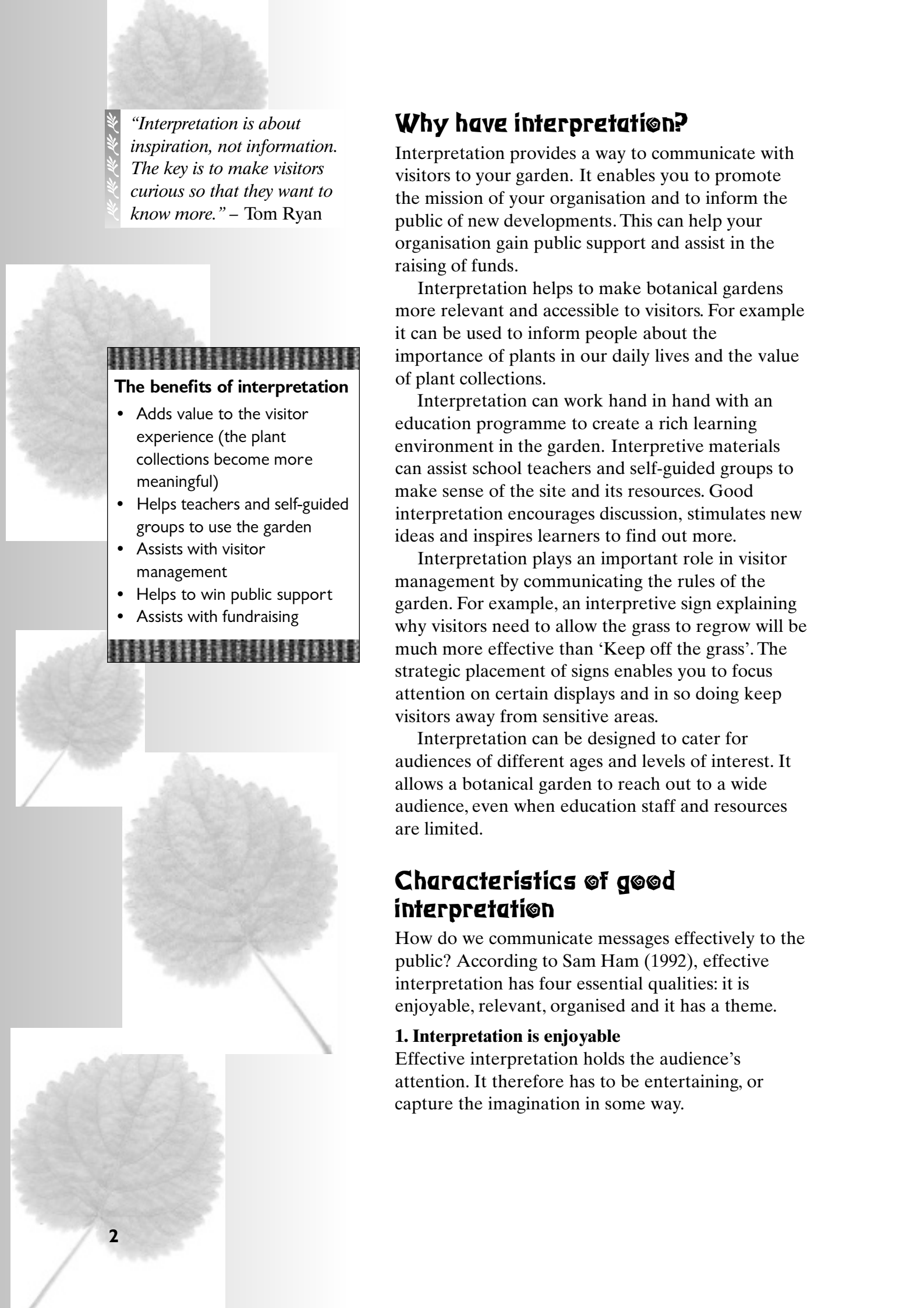


Interpretation is used at sites visited by the general public such as botanical gardens, zoos, nature reserves, museums and cultural or historical sites. (Bronx Zoo, New York)

How does interpretation differ from education?

The biggest difference lies in the nature of the audience. Learners in a classroom are a *captive audience* because they have to pay attention and listen if they want to pass their exams. On the other hand, most visitors to a botanical garden come to relax and enjoy themselves. They don’t have to pay attention unless they want to, so they are a *non-captive audience*. If the trail guide is boring or if it takes too much effort to understand, they will simply stop listening or reading and move on.

Interpretation therefore has to stimulate interest and capture the imagination in such a way that visitors are excited and want to learn more.



*“Interpretation is about inspiration, not information. The key is to make visitors curious so that they want to know more.” – Tom Ryan*

### **The benefits of interpretation**

- Adds value to the visitor experience (the plant collections become more meaningful)
- Helps teachers and self-guided groups to use the garden
- Assists with visitor management
- Helps to win public support
- Assists with fundraising

## **Why have interpretation?**

Interpretation provides a way to communicate with visitors to your garden. It enables you to promote the mission of your organisation and to inform the public of new developments. This can help your organisation gain public support and assist in the raising of funds.

Interpretation helps to make botanical gardens more relevant and accessible to visitors. For example it can be used to inform people about the importance of plants in our daily lives and the value of plant collections.

Interpretation can work hand in hand with an education programme to create a rich learning environment in the garden. Interpretive materials can assist school teachers and self-guided groups to make sense of the site and its resources. Good interpretation encourages discussion, stimulates new ideas and inspires learners to find out more.

Interpretation plays an important role in visitor management by communicating the rules of the garden. For example, an interpretive sign explaining why visitors need to allow the grass to regrow will be much more effective than ‘Keep off the grass’. The strategic placement of signs enables you to focus attention on certain displays and in so doing keep visitors away from sensitive areas.

Interpretation can be designed to cater for audiences of different ages and levels of interest. It allows a botanical garden to reach out to a wide audience, even when education staff and resources are limited.

## **Characteristics of good interpretation**

How do we communicate messages effectively to the public? According to Sam Ham (1992), effective interpretation has four essential qualities: it is enjoyable, relevant, organised and it has a theme.

### **1. Interpretation is enjoyable**

Effective interpretation holds the audience’s attention. It therefore has to be entertaining, or capture the imagination in some way.

“Effective interpretation doesn’t mean telling people what you know . . . it means using what you know to engage, provoke and motivate visitors to become active participants in their own learning.”

– Tom Ryan

## 2. Interpretation is relevant

People will only find something meaningful if they can relate to it. It is therefore essential that interpretation is relevant to the visitor’s personal experience.

## 3. Interpretation is organised

Casual visitors won’t spend a lot of time and effort trying to follow a difficult presentation because they’ve come to the garden to relax and enjoy themselves. Interpretation must therefore be well organised and easy to understand.

## 4. Interpretation has a theme

Good interpretation always contains a main idea or take-home message. We call this the *theme*. It can usually be expressed as a single sentence which is easy to remember and understand. When interpretation contains a random selection of facts and has no theme, people may think ‘so what?’ or wonder ‘what’s the point of this all?’ Having a clear theme gives the audience a reason to listen.

Interpretation is all about *engaging* the audience. Here are a few general tips on how to capture people’s attention:

- Involve people with all their senses by using interactive displays or multi-sensory activities
- Encourage questioning and enquiry
- Promote discussion and action
- Be responsive to the group or changes in the environment

