

# COLORING OUTSIDE THE





# GUIDE LINES

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS

BY IAIN M. ROBERTSON

*Siddhartha said: "What could I say to you that would be of value, except that perhaps you seek too much, that as a result of your seeking you cannot find."*

*"How is that?" asked Govinda.*

*"When someone is seeking," said Siddhartha, "it happens quite easily that he only sees the thing that he is seeking; that he is unable to find anything, unable to absorb anything, because he is only thinking of the thing he is seeking, because he has a goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: to have a goal; but finding means: to be free, to be receptive, to have no goal."*

"SIDDHARTHA," HERMAN HESSE

These notes are based on a talk I gave to the Japanese Garden guides and the ensuing conversation the guides and I had. They describe issues that should be considered and techniques that guides may use to lead successful garden tours, specifically tours of Seattle's Japanese Garden. These notes, distilled from this conversation with tour leaders will, I hope, provide answers to the question that must be on the mind of every garden guide: How can visitors get the most rewarding experience from their visit to this garden?

This raises several questions about the roles played by tour guides: Do we "give" visitors the best experience or do we design our tour so that they "get" the most rewarding experience? How much of the responsibility for a successful visit

**LEFT:** A laceleaf maple may reveal another world, missed if we just walk by.





resides with the guide and how much with the visitor? Is it our job as guides to tell visitors everything we think they need to know, or should we try to get them in the right frame of mind to enjoy the experience of the garden and learn from that? As a teacher I have become increasingly wary of laying down explicit “explanations” and increasingly enamored of “experience” as an effective teacher, and this seems a particularly valid approach in a garden tour, particularly a tour of a garden like the Japanese Garden, with its rich store of historic associations, important cultural meanings, horticultural and biological interest, and experiential richness, not to mention paths of varied width and inviting intersections. I was pleased to discover that this view was shared by many guides.

But a “provocation” was needed to get our conversation going; accordingly, I began exploring the idea of learning from direct experience in a garden tour with a quote from David Abram’s “The Spell of the Sensuous”:

“The human mind is not some otherworldly essence that comes to house itself inside our physiology. Rather, it is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself, induced by the tensions and participations between the human

body and the animate earth. The invisible shapes of smells, rhythms of cricket song, and the movement of shadows all, in a sense, provide the subtle body of our thoughts. Our own reflections, we might say, are a part of the play of light and its reflections. (As the poet Rilke asked, “The inner—what is it, if not intensified sky?”)”

By acknowledging such links between the inner, psychological world and the perceptual terrain that surrounds us, we begin to turn inside-out, loosening the

psyche from its confinement within a strictly human sphere, freeing sentience to return to the sensible world that contains us. Intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths. And indeed each terrain, each ecology, seems to have its own particular intelligence, its unique vernacular of soil and leaf and sky. Each place its own mind, its own psyche.

Abram’s ideas suggest that gardens should be experienced sensuously as well as intellectually—felt, as well as thought about. A garden’s “meaning” is more than a cognitive understanding; it is the sum of body, senses, mind and spiritual experiences. Using Abram’s language one might ask, “What ‘spells’ does a visit to the Japanese Garden cast on the senses?” or, “What ‘spells’ would we like the Garden to cast on visitors?” Expanding on Rilke’s metaphor, we might ask, “How can we make the ‘inner world’ of our visitors an ‘intensified garden?’” We may go farther, giving ourselves the task of discovering the garden’s “mind” and “psyche.”

Abram goes further, suggesting that each place possesses a “place-specific intelligence,” an idea that closely parallels a concept of central importance to my profession of landscape archi-

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**ABOVE:** Treading lightly to find the garden’s ‘place-specific intelligence,’  
it’s *genius loci*.





ecture: the *genius loci*. Translated as the “spirit of place,” the *genius loci* is what makes each place unique, distinctive, and different from all others—and thus valuable for itself. How can we reveal or experience the garden’s particular “intelligence” and value? What is the garden’s place-specific intelligence and our shared intelligence with it when we are in it and part of it? Such a lot of questions incited by a brief quotation!

### **PRACTICAL ISSUES AND CONCERNS— THE FEAR THAT WE OMIT TO MENTION SOMETHING**

These questions are, of course, rhetorical and intended to provide a context in which to think about leading effective garden tours. Fundamentally our job is to integrate information and sensory experience into an authentic whole. This suggests that the guide’s job is to provide information in ways that promote and enrich direct, individual experience, and that guides might better think of themselves as choreographers rather than encyclopedias—or Google searches—making space, during tours, for experiences and information to unfold in ways that reinforce rather than compete; that is,

thinking of information as the icing on the experience, not the cake itself. How do we initiate an appropriate attitude of mind to enjoy a garden experience, and how do we cultivate and enhance this attitude of mind throughout the tour, even as we infiltrate information in ways that enrich, deepen, sharpen and spice individual experiences?

Thinking of the tour guide’s job in this way raises yet more questions about where, when and how best to introduce information during a tour. How much to say and how much to leave unsaid? How to provide facts without clogging minds? How to inform in ways that enhance rather than diminish experience? Clearly, it is undesirable to cram as much information as possible into visitors, as this is likely to overwhelm and turn off the senses, but can we leave things unsaid in ways that encourage visitors to make their own connections and discoveries? Can we leave things unsaid, expecting them to be raised in questions and discussions? Can we be content with our job if they don’t come up at all? By posing these questions I don’t mean to imply that we simply turn visitors loose to wander and experience for themselves, though some always prefer this option. But most visitors want some explanations.

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**ABOVE:** There’s so much that could be said, but if we attempt to reveal it all in one tour, the garden’s charm may be broken.

How do we provide for this reasonable need, where information reinforces experience and vice versa? How can we inform and lead without being prescriptive: opening up possibilities for understanding without telling visitors what they should think, how they should experience?

How might we answer these questions if we imagined our task as inducing visitors to fall under the spell of the garden? Would we think differently of the garden's unfolding narrative as we walk around it if our goal was to help visitors discover the story, not reveal the plot and what the last page of the story contains? How do we talk about our experiences, what we see and appreciate without dictating what others should observe/experience? Perhaps we might ask questions, such as: How do you feel about this place, view or part of the garden?

These questions are not answered in abstract. Their answers depend on real, tangible and practical considerations, among them: group size and language barriers; health, age and mobility; available time; weather conditions; and more subtle distinctions, such as the character of the group, its interest level, knowledge and familiarity with the garden. Each tour is different; we work with the group we have and the conditions of the moment. We rarely linger when rainwater begins to dribble down the backs of our necks or the tour bus honks its horn.

The following considerations and suggestions are not precise and infallible instructions for how to lead the perfect tour. They are guidelines, reminders of things that guides already know. But, first, another reminder: Getting outside is always an adventure, and nowhere is this more true than in a visit to a garden like the Japanese Garden. John Stilgoe offers stellar and sterling advice:

"Get out now. Not just outside, but beyond the trap of the programmed electronic age so gently closing around so many people at the end of our century. Go outside, move deliberately, then relax, slow down. Look around. Do not jog. Do not run. Forget about blood pressure and arthritis, cardiovascular rejuvenation and

weight reduction. Instead pay attention to everything that abuts the rural road, the city street, the suburban boulevard. Walk. Stroll. Saunter. Ride a bike, and coast along a lot. Explore.

"Flex the mind a little at first, then a lot. Savor something special. Enjoy the best-kept secret around—the ordinary, everyday landscape that rewards any explorer, that touches any explorer with magic."

—From "Outside Lies Magic: Regaining History & Awareness in Everyday Places"

So how should we orchestrate, choreograph, narrate and guide one of Seattle's most beguiling and magical adventures—a visit to the Japanese Garden?

## **ENTERING THE GARDEN—INITIATING WAYS OF EXPERIENCING & BEING**

Clichéd but true: First impressions are important. In the case of garden tours we might better say: The adventure starts at the entrance—every entrance should en-trance. This is the time to assemble as a group, pay entry fees, and set behavioral expectations and responsibilities. More subtly, this is when we begin to recalibrate our attitudes of mind toward the coming experience. Here we set the stage for the play.

The Japanese Garden is blessed with a beautifully articulated gateway set over a large threshold stone. This gate is preceded by a courtyard, graciously sized to accommodate assembling and getting organized before entering the Garden. The practical is dealt with in the courtyard, while crossing the threshold stone addresses aesthetic or symbolic considerations and perceptions. Symbolism is important, and nowhere more so than in preparing visitors to appreciate the Japanese Garden. At the entrance we invite visitors to adopt an experiential frame of mind, perhaps by encouraging them to become conscious of or "get in touch with"—and trust—their own sensory experiences, to get senses and mind on the same wavelength. More often than not this process involves slowing down and putting behind one the rush and frenzy of daily life, including arrival at the Garden.





Drawing visitors' attention to the symbolism of the threshold stone and the framed view into—but not too far into!—the Garden, is a physical and symbolic invitation to reawaken senses numbed by travel or dormant from disuse. How can we help visitors dust off their senses in ways that give them confidence in their own experience and their own interpretation and their own understanding? The Garden assists this process by rewarding rather than assaulting the senses—sight, smell and sound. We may do so as guides by gently reminding visitors to slow down and smell, touch, feel the experience. To open up.

Almost immediately upon entering the Garden the way ahead is partially blocked by a lovely lace-leaf Japanese maple, a hint that this journey is not for those wishing to travel in the “fast lane,” nor for those who expect everything to be clear, straightforward and unambiguous. Here we might invite visitors to

tell us what they see beyond the veil and what purpose this veil serves.

“Crossing the threshold stone is a symbolic act of putting the past behind and responding differently to what lies ahead. It is an opportunity to put in place an appropriate frame of mind for the visit, for setting the stage, and putting aside preconceptions.”

*Unit 86 volunteer*

### **THE PATH AS A NARRATIVE— A TEMPORAL THREADING TOGETHER OF SPATIAL EXPERIENCES**

A “journey of a thousand miles” may begin not so much with one step but by initiating a story. Think of the Garden's paths as a narrative, an unfolding story line—a temporal and spatial experience. In the West narratives equate with books, but a guide suggested a scroll as a better metaphor for the continuity and connectedness of these garden experiences; a scroll that

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**ABOVE:** From the entrance we can see in far enough to be hooked. But what lies beyond?





we unroll to read what lies ahead and allow to roll up behind us. The Garden itself is the story, so our job is not to write the text but to choreograph the scroll's unfurling, to tell this story of these sequential experiences. Marc Treib points out that the famous 18th-century English landscape architect "Capability" Brown saw his design work in this way, using punctuation metaphors to describe how he manipulated sequential spatial experiences.

It is interesting that Lancelot "Capability" Brown described his compositional tactics in terms of ortho-graphy. In a conversation with Hannah Moore shortly before his death, Brown asserted: "Now there . . . I make a comma, and there," pointing to another spot, "where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon; at another spot, where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject." ("Sites

Unseen: Landscape & Vision," editors Dianne Harris & D. Fairchild Ruggles)

The narrative metaphor emphasizes connections between the physical experience—moving through garden space, and around, over and through plant masses and objects—and mental engagement. The more a tour becomes a narrative the more likely visitors will become readers of a garden rather than plodders along a path. We narrate garden stories at the same time as we choreograph visitors' movement patterns. To do this we must constantly think about where we are now, what lies ahead, and what led us to this point. Does the experience unfold gradually and steadily, as it might along a gently curving path? Or do the path's twists and turns generate surprises and changes? Does the path orient us to the garden itself by disorienting us and making us forget where we came from, so that we are not distracted by earlier experiences?

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**ABOVE** There is no single, correct translation of the "narrative of a path," but the narrative metaphor and the directional path lead the imagination on, and the feet will surely follow. A straight path tells one story.



Do paths widen to provide 'breathing room,' or narrow to require single file passage? If so, what are the resulting experiences? How do the garden's spaces encourage us to slow down or speed up? Stop and sit, or keep going? What draws us forward and what encourages us to linger? Experiences become richer and more coherent as garden spaces, story lines and movement patterns are better integrated. All garden experiences are sequential—even one as simple as entering and leaving a single garden room. The Japanese Garden's path from the entrance to the teahouse draws us on mysteriously—the journey itself is delightful but the destination is unclear. Other parts of the Garden reward us in different ways. The stroll around the pond, for example, is like walking around a large room, seeing it from different directions and perspectives. Effective tours integrate movement patterns, spaces and story lines.

"How to decide which way to go when a path forks? [One] may go either way. [There is] no one right or usual route, sometimes [the decision is] left to chance or whim, sometimes a guest's interests."

*Unit 86 volunteer*

If we think of the tour as an unfolding narrative—a story line with surprise and confirmation, reassurance and uncertainty, continuity and variety—this will encourage us to think about where we want to slow down, peer ahead, or sit and look around. ∞

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**IAIN M. ROBERTSON** is an associate professor of the Landscape Architecture Department and an adjunct faculty member in the Center for Urban Horticulture and School of Forest Resources at the University of Washington. Like the Unit 86 guides, he, too, has fallen under the spell of Washington Park Arboretum's Japanese Garden.

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## Responding to the Garden's Clues

Having discussed the spatial aspects of garden experiences in the Spring issue of the “Bulletin,” let me now turn to how a garden’s materiality and its sensory delights are interrelated and must be considered in choreographing a tour. Garden experiences are more than just spatial; our engagement with their materiality delights the senses, and our tour choreography must consider these cues. Spatial experiences tend to be subconscious, but the material components of gardens are central to our conscious experience—the sight, feel and smell of plants; the sound of water; the crunch of gravel; the glint of sunlight. The list goes on...

At risk of stating the obvious, it is worth mentioning that tours should engage all the senses. As Yogi Berra might say, had he been a Japanese Garden tour guide: “You can hear a lot by just listening,” and “You can feel a lot by just touching.” Guides use a variety of methods to elicit sensory responses: asking visitors to brush gently past plants or pat moss to feel its resilient springiness, to notice how feet respond to gravel paths compared to steppingstones when crossing a stream, to feel the difference between pines with pliant needles and those with firm, prickly ones. How else might we encourage visitors to engage more senses than just sight, without damaging the garden?

## Information

Sometimes we turn to gardens and their direct, sensory experiences to escape the inces-

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**LEFT:** Paradoxically—and the garden is always paradoxical—it might be easier to engage the imagination when the garden is cold, damp and foggy, when things begin to merge in a blur.





sant overload of the “Information Age.” But one of our primary “jobs” as guides is to inform visitors, so our next concern is how to engage the mind as well as the senses. Paradoxical though it may sound to educators who favor antiseptic classrooms, the more the senses are stimulated, the more engaged the mind becomes. Thus one is not evading one’s responsibility as a source of information if, instead of simply informing visitors, one asks them to look, listen, touch—to use all the senses. We do so to encourage visitors to understand a garden

through making sensory experience and mental understanding symbiotic. In contexts where sensory rewards are sparser, this approach may be ineffective, but in the context of gardens it’s crucial to make the visit tangible as well as mental. The choreographer’s job may consist of posing well-timed and carefully crafted questions. One might, for example, be tempted to ask, while crossing the stream, whether it is speaking in Japanese or English.

The guide’s job is more than just providing a stream of information. Above all we should

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**ABOVE:** A view may be worth a thousand words, but a well-chosen word may also bring a scene to life, allowing us to see it from a fresh perspective. It’s not a question of talk versus silence but of choosing words that encourage visitors to observe more closely and feel more deeply.



avoid the fire-hose approach. Perhaps our job is to provide information on a “need-to-know” not a “need-to-tell” basis. Choreographing the interplay of information and experience is a guide’s most essential skill. Our job consists of integrating a sequence of experiences with information, deciding when and where to say—as much as what to say—with the goal of putting visitors in the right frame of mind to get the most from the experiences. Thus we decide what route to take, where to pause, and when and how to move on, at the same time we decide what to say. Questions may be a guide’s best friend. We may ask, “What do you notice standing here?” or “How might a 16th-century owner of a garden like this have responded to this view?” And the perennial question, which should not be the exclusive province of two-year-olds, “Why?”

Asking questions ensures that the tour is not just about the garden itself, but is about the visitor too! So a tour is not just a story, a dance, a lecture and an experience; it is also a conversation—a conversation whose goal is to convert visitors!

### **Conversations and Feedback**

“It’s all about communication—getting on the same wavelength as one’s group. Ask where they are from to try and see where they are coming from mentally.”

—Unit 86 volunteer

A garden tour is a three-way conversation between visitors, the guide and the garden. In David Abram’s words, we wish to merge the “mind” and “psyche” of this place with the mind and psyche of each visitor. Effective guides are good listeners as well as good talkers, always asking themselves, “Do I have the balance right?” and “Am I connecting?” Or they are asking, “Do I see what you mean?” as well as “Do you see what I mean?” and “Do we both see what the garden means?” We must also be open to the possibility that the garden may mean different things to different people, may mean different

things at different times, and might even change its mind. In design, there is never one right answer.

Other questions that may occur to a guide creating a tour experience could include: “How much should I explain and how much should I ask questions?” “How much should I let the garden provide the answers?” “How should I respond to keep the conversation going?” The guide’s job includes deciding what to draw attention to and how to “frame” views both mentally and physically.

The goal of the conversation is to help visitors make discoveries for themselves rather than to provide answers. There is an art to telling visitors about the garden in ways that makes them more observant, rather than supplying information that negates the need to look and think—to tell, suggest and ask in ways that reveal new perspectives that enrich experiences.

Some examples include: “So, why do you think these leaves are a different color from those over there?” or “Why do you think the designer made the bridge crooked rather than straight?” The questions one could ask are endless. Some have factual answers, but we should not be afraid of posing open-ended questions to which there are no definitive answers. These make one think! As one guide put it, the goal of a tour is to integrate senses and intellect, to generate a holistic view of the world.

### **Surprise, Surprise**

But, what creates the most intense surprise,  
His soul looks out through renovated eyes.

—John Keats, “Ode to Apollo”

Suggesting that one of a guide’s tasks is to surprise visitors may be surprising, but surprises can be shockingly revealing and memorable—which, of course, is what we want visits to be. Surprise and confirmation; doubt and reassurance; anticipation and reward; these are dramatic techniques that remind us that a tour is also a





play. While we must begin by building reassurance and comfort to make visitors open to experience and ideas, we must also spice our tours with surprises—dramatic effects that drive home messages, that challenge, that leave us wondering. How do we wish the acts of the play to intersect with the garden's scenes? We are, after all, on location!

There's no doubt that making the narrative score fit the spaces, features and sequences of the garden is crucial for a successful tour. But guides must do more; they must discretely amplify or highlight the garden's messages without distorting them—make them larger than life without becoming caricatures.

In a sense, our tours are the makeup on the garden's face.

### **Engage Imagination**

It's taken a long time to get here, following roundabout routes, but my main point is that successful garden tours engage visitors' imaginations. Rich realities reward imagination. A designer has probably considered how the garden's paths, plants and places orchestrate and sequence experiences, create expectations, withhold and provide rewards, and offer answers to questions such as: "What do you think we might see around the next corner?" and "Are we there yet?" Nature may have

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**ABOVE:** Perhaps a "prompt" provided by guides will change with the garden's mood: sun or rain, wet or dry, hot or cold, summer or winter.





provided answers to other questions, such as "What do you think the underside of the leaves look like?" and "What would this scene look like in winter, in the evening, in sunny weather?" Culture, however, may have answers to questions such as "What patterns do the fallen leaves make, and how have they been interpreted in art?"

If we engage visitors' imaginations, our tour has succeeded regardless of how much information we may have managed to insert into the discussion, whether the sun shone or the rain rained, or whether it was a whirlwind, whistle-stop tour or a leisurely, contemplative perambulation. To engage the imagination is to

unify all experiences and to align these experiences with the garden.

Other questions to pose: "How would the owner of a garden like this in traditional Japan have understood and responded to features/experiences?" "Have we been able to walk a bit in another's muse?"

How could I advise him? she says. Whatever he does it'll be wrong.

Why wrong?

It always is. He thinks about it too much. It's all theoretical to him.

—*Gabriel Josipovici*, "In a Hotel Garden"

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**ABOVE:** Sitting in the shade of the teahouse on a hot afternoon, what conversations might it inspire, and what might it have to say for itself?





We must get beyond the abstract and theoretical. Our information must be fully integrated with the experience, which itself is part and parcel of the garden. The difference between school-age and adult visitors, according to several guides is that “kids are much more willing to engage their imaginations, while adults are more reticent and restrained.” To enter the kingdom of the imagination we must become as little children.

### **Drawing to a Close**

If we have choreographed our tour well, if our visitors have behaved, if the weather has smiled, if the garden’s charms have not inveigled us to stop too often, then we will find ourselves drawing to a close with a few moments to tie a bow to ornament the experience.

But wait! Have we remembered to celebrate the garden’s crescendo; its “deep-heart’s” core; its central message, experience and place? Did

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**ABOVE:** The narrative path draws to a close.



we stop our tour at an appropriate point to say, "Now we have arrived. Now we are here. Now."? Perhaps that was the place where we said, "Stop! Close your eyes and feel the garden with your skin and ears." Have we, in Abram's words, "turn[ed] inside-out"? Have we "loosen[ed] the psyche from its confinement within a strictly human sphere"? Has the garden "free[d] sentience to return to the sensible world that contains us"?

A tour's end (and an article's end!) is not the place to spill forth everything that inadvertently got omitted. One must trust that the genius of the place has done its work and that visitors will return in memory, if not in person. Now is the time to prepare the psyche for re-entry to daily life. Exits matter.

It is commonplace to observe that first impressions are important, but—though less commonly noted—so, too, are good good-byes. How do we successfully end a tour? Hopefully

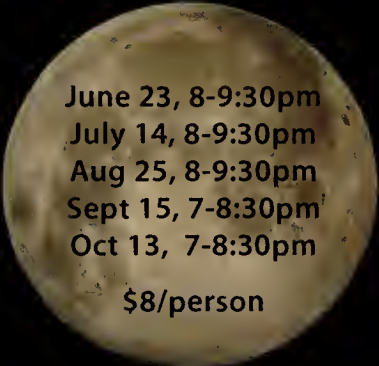
not with a mad dash for a bus impatiently blowing its horn or threading our way through the obligatory gift-shop maze. What "take-home" messages and memories do we wish to impart? What would we most like visitors to remember? Do we have a favorite place in which to deliver a few well-chosen parting words? Have our visitors been captivated by the garden? Is part of their "inner core" now an "intensified garden"? Will they return? ∞

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**Iain Robertson** is an associate professor of the Landscape Architecture Department and an adjunct faculty member in the Center for Urban Horticulture and School for Forest Resources at the University of Washington. Like the Unit 86 guides, he, too, has fallen under the spell of Washington Park Arboretum's Japanese Garden.

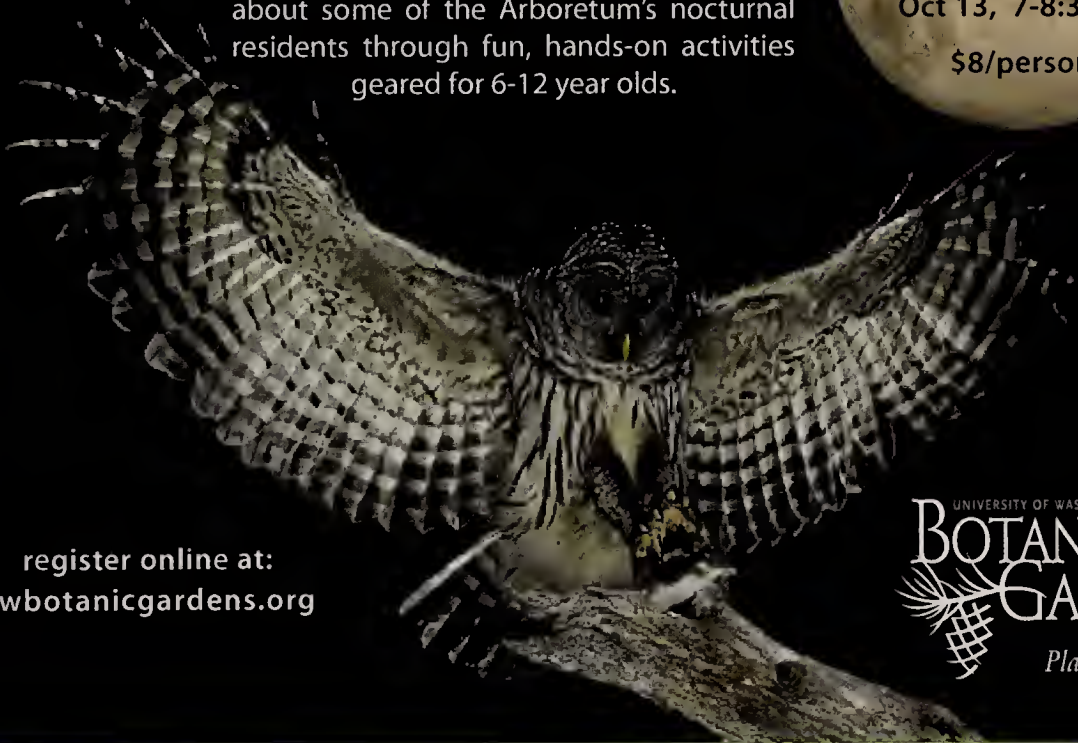
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