Fun and Learning on the Go

Discovery Packs Promote Family Explorations

Julie Warsowe, Manager of Visitor Education

A treasure trove of biodiversity, the Arnold Arboretum invites new discoveries with every visit. This past summer, the Arboretum launched a new way for families to engage with the landscape and learn about plants together. Funded by a gift from the Arnold Arboretum Committee, Explorer’s Club discovery packs are now available to borrow, free of charge, in the Hunnewell Visitor Center. Part of an ongoing effort to further engage young visitors, the backpacks promote compelling explorations of both the Arboretum and the natural world.

Explorer’s Club packs give parents, grandparents, or caregivers the tools and know-how to facilitate fun and informative experiences for kids. Families may choose from two themes, the Living Museum and the Science Lab. The Living Museum packs focus on how the Arboretum collects and cares for living plants and makes them available for public study and enjoyment as a “tree museum.” The Science Lab packs encourage kids to think and experiment in the landscape like plant scientists.

Each pack features four activities, and visitor feedback so far suggests that one activity per visit works well. Many of the activities are designed to be repeated on later visits, so the packs can be borrowed multiple times to experience them in full. Participants may adapt the activities to a wide age range (three and up) while encouraging siblings and peers of multiple ages to make discoveries together. The packs also fit well with after-school programs and other youth groups, provided an adequate number of adults is available to help guide the investigations.

Launched in June, the discovery packs were developed by our Visitor Education team with the assistance of Elizabeth Hilt, an intern from the Harvard Extension School Graduate Program in Museum Studies. “While a family visit to the Arboretum always promises fun,” Elizabeth muses, “the discovery packs take the experience to a whole new level, inspiring new perspectives on what the Arboretum is all about.” One of the activities—Champion Tree Challenge—uses a number of measurement tools and techniques to help children identify the biggest tree they encounter on their visit. While promoting interactive fun, the experiment also shines a light on how and why Arboretum staff monitor the health and growth of each of the plants in the collection.

The discovery packs have already begun to make an impression. One parent recently emailed: “I just wanted to let you know that today my four year old asked if we could play Tree Bingo at home! Thank you for a fun afternoon. We look forward to trying more backpack activities in the future.” Stop in and join our Explorers Club by checking out a discovery pack, and turn your next visit into an Arboretum adventure.