

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Can one squeeze water from sandstone in the middle of a pandemic?

Tulsa Botanic Garden is no stranger to finding itself wedged between a rock and a hard place — the rocks being literal sandstone of the majestic Osage hills, the hard place proverbial of the everyday challenges we face as a young botanic garden. We have encountered innumerable obstacles since our inception — from goats and county road potholes to lulls in funding and rocks — so many rocks. Little did we know that when we started 2020, we would confront our largest obstacle to date, COVID-19. Growth and change are as inevitable as Osage County rocks and taxes. If we could survive digging up another piece of sandstone and our plants could coexist with what we left behind, we could surely survive this pandemic.

With every blow dealt, we responded with tenacity. After all, persistence is key, but it is only applicable in a conventional, pre-pandemic, linear structure. We dove into the pool of uncertainty head first and hoped it wasn't the shallow end. On March 17, 2020, we made the difficult decision to close the garden until further notice as local hospitals began to experience overwhelming capacity.

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC

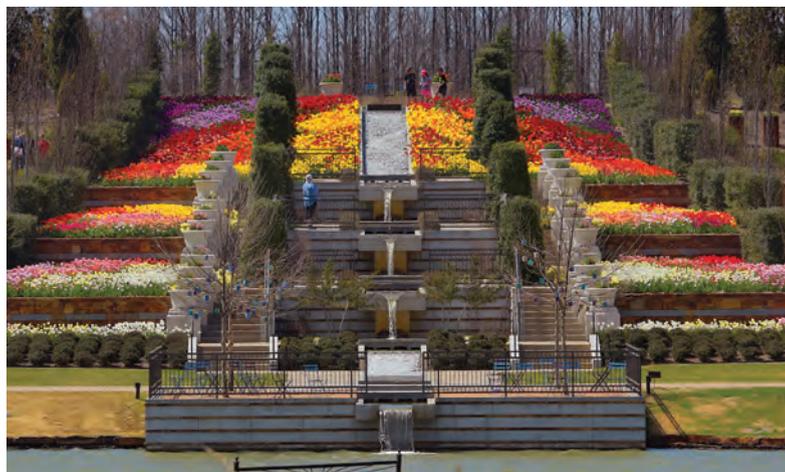
As an organization solely dependent upon admissions, fundraisers, plant sales and generous donors, closing our doors during our annual spring event, Tulsa Botanic Blooms, was disheartening. We refrained from verbalizing our concerns through the masks embellishing our worried faces, yet the questions remained: "How would we keep the public engaged? How could we keep ourselves safe? How would we host a plant sale while closed?" Every question that anxiety could ask, was asked.

So, how do you eat an elephant? No, not one bite at a time. You hand out forks and invite your friends. We bounced ideas off of one another until we had a viable solution. "How did we keep the public engaged?" Take tulips to staff at the hospitals and flood them with social media garden posts. "How would we keep our staff safe?" Work in shifts. If one crew gets sick, the other crew would remain safe and keep operations growing. The most challenging question on the list for me remained: "How would we host a plant sale if we were closed?" (Insert cricket chirping here.)

I sat in silence in our Zoom meeting, paralyzed with anxiety about the situation — partially because I have the attention span of a gnat and was distracted from my computer screen by an echinacea in a Terra Nova Nursery catalog (thanks, Dan). That's when the thought hit me and before I could analyze what my brain delivered to my voice, I blurted out, "Why can't we sell online with curbside pickup? I get my groceries with curbside pickup."



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Photos: Tulsa Botanic Garden

Historically, we transferred plants from our greenhouse to our multipurpose building known as the J.E. and L.E. Mabee Grange the day before the sale. Historically, our director of communications and outreach, Lori Hutson, had months to plan a postcard to mail. Historically, the gifted staff who direct the Visitor Center had time to prepare their technology for a sale. Since it was 2020, we took the general term for describing history, threw it out the window, and assembled a shiny new definition of historic. Sink or swim, we were doing this.

NEW HISTORY IS BORN

We reached the summit of the mountain and in unprecedented time (to match the unprecedented times), our team of talented staff put together an online sale on a sales platform historically used for selling ballet and opera tickets. Over the course of three days, sales poured in, we sold out of almost everything, final sales tally for spring 2020 was three times more than the previous two sales combined, and the silver lining could be seen from atop the sandstone summit of the Osage Hills.

As it turns out, wedging yourself between Osage County rocks and a hard place is the best way to squeeze water from a stone. [gpn](https://www.gpn.org)