Rooted
Cultivating a New Generation of Botanists
Changing the Plant-Hunting Culture
Shirley Meneice Horticulture Conference
Founders Fund Finalists
IN WONDERLAND... WITH SHIRLEY

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Through the gate at Winterthur, the first stop for the 240 delegates at this year's Shirley Meneice Horticulture Conference, it was easy to feel like Alice stepping through the looking glass—things grew "curiouser and curiouser."

Riding in yellow school buses down the lane and over the hill, we passed a giant sandstone pyramid topped with a romantic finial, impossibly floating in the middle of a lake. Called the Needle's Eye, it is part of Winterthur's exhibit Follies: Architectural Whimsy in the Garden on display until January 2020, and offers a dramatic contrast between Winterthur's naturalistic woods designed by H. F. du Pont and the fantastical follies scattered throughout its landscape. We ambled up twisting paths through moss and fern-filled forests and caught the flash of a "looking glass" as we glimpsed another folly—a little gatehouse covered with mirrors on top of the hill. Around the bend was a miniature temple that seemed to have fallen off the Acropolis and landed in a Delaware meadow. In the Enchanted Woods we discovered a giant bird's nest, a fairytale thatched cottage, and, as if she had followed the white rabbit, there was Shirley Meneice herself—in full-scale foam core—having tea with proper cups at a miniature table made of stone. Although the real Shirley was unable to attend the extraordinary symposium named in her honor, her foam core stand-in was escorted throughout the conference by Horticulture Committee Chairman Kathy Shepperly and starred in many pictures.

Our next stop was the legendary Longwood Gardens, host site of the conference. This year's theme, "Deep Roots in the Brandywine Valley," was brought to life at the main entrance of the visitor center, where we walked in a tunnel through a grass-covered earthen bern as though we were following Alice's path down the rabbit hole. When we emerged on the other side, as the landscape architects had planned, the real world was left behind. A green explosion met our eyes. We were in Wonderland!

There, in Longwood Gardens' 1,077 acres, we saw dahlias the size of dinner plates and bright neon water lilies floating next to the enormous leaves of Victoria 'Longwood Hybrid,' often referred to as a giant water platter. In the historic conservatory, famed for its seasonal displays, we were surrounded by decades-old ferns, towering tropics, and a rare night-blooming cereus (Cereus peruvianus), whose huge, fragrant, creamy blooms are seldom seen by the 1.5 million visitors who come to Longwood annually, because they only bloom at night and only for one night. As we wandered along miles of paths through meadow gardens, we discovered the children's garden, an "idea garden," the rose garden, an Italian garden, and even a grotto. The highlight was Longwood's famed fountain system, first installed by founder Pierre du Pont, and its newly restored Main Fountain Garden, with water jets that shoot over one hundred feet in the air in exquisite patterns, brilliantly and colorfully illuminated, and timed to all manner of music—from Ravel's Boléro to the Beatles.

The Meneice Conference is held annually at one of the country's top botanical meccas. As delegates, we had the opportunity to meet with some of the most knowledgeable horticulturists in the world and walk with them through acres of gardens. To have one of the senior gardeners put on boots and waders and show us the spectacular underside of the giant water lily leaves and tell us about hand pollinating the flowers—well, it was like Wonderland, or maybe heaven. That's what it felt like at the Meneice Conference. The schedule this year included 44 special classes hosted by experts in dahlias, orchids, bonsai, vegetables, pests, and perennials.