

ATTRACTIVENESS OF VYTAUTAS MAGNUS BOTANICAL GARDEN FROM THE YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. Botanical gardens vary in their design, plant expositions, but most usually they are associated with science, environmental conservation, education, and have an infrastructure for visitors as the places for recreation and leisure. The Botanical Garden of Vytautas Magnus University (VMU), located in Kaunas, offers a wide range of services and is relatively popular object for visitors. The specialists of this botanical garden are working intensively with publicity of information and events, but they observe that young people do not visit this garden much. The aim of this study was to determine how young people evaluate the attractiveness of VMU Botanical Garden for recreation and leisure.

Keywords: young visitors; Kaunas; leisure; dissemination of information; events and activities.

INTRODUCTION

Botanical gardens are designed for the creation and demonstration of plant collections, research, and education, also, they are popular places for recreation and entertainment in many countries (Williams et al., 2015; Krishnan, Novy, 2016). The initial idea of botanical gardens is the preservation of plants (Smith, 2018; Westwood et al., 2021), but not less important is the education of society and the promotion of nature conservation. These places are visited by both local visitors and foreign tourists, and they are considered as important attractions in a tourism sector (Ballantyne et al., 2008). The visitors of botanical gardens can also encourage local people to contribute to the preservation of cultural identity and sustainable regional development (Fox, 2007). While interest in visiting botanical gardens has been growing in the recent years, newer solutions how to attract more visitors of different ages and interests are being discussed. The high quality of activities provided by botanical gardens and the experience of visitors determine visitor satisfaction and intentions to revisit the same botanical garden (Shapoval et al. 2020).

Botanical gardens vary greatly in their design and purpose, but usually they are associated with environmental conservation, education, and are attempted to attract visitors for recreation and leisure. The Botanical Garden of Vytautas Magnus University (VMU) was established in Kaunas in 1923. It is the second largest botanical garden in Lithuania. VMU Botanical Garden offers a wide range of services and is relatively popular object for visitors of different age. The specialists of this botanical garden are constantly posting the public information about ongoing activities and events (Information about VMU Botanical Garden events, 2021). Despite the mentioned issues, it is still relevant to find out how to attract more youth to visit this botanical garden. More often, young people choose other urban spaces (parks, squares) or focus on spending time indoors for entertainment and leisure. It has been noticed that visitors up to 30 years old make up only a small part of VMU Botanical Garden visitors and know little about the possibilities to spend free time getting acquainted with plant collections or the educations organized in this botanical garden.

The aim of the study was to determine how young people evaluate the attractiveness of VMU Botanical Garden for recreation and leisure. More specifically, the objectives of this survey were to evaluate the awareness of VMU Botanical Garden and the attractiveness of activities and infrastructure for young people, and to present the possibilities of increasing the attractiveness of VMU Botanical Garden for young people.

RESEARCH METHODS

For the theoretical analysis, the annual reports and official websites of the institutions, and scientific articles were analysed. To find out how young people evaluate the attractiveness of VMU Botanical Garden for recreation and leisure, a quantitative survey (questionnaire) was conducted in 2021. The questionnaire survey was organized in advance by preparing 23 questions for the respondents. The respondents were able to express their opinion about their visit to VMU Botanical Garden, i.e., how often they visit this garden, with whom they usually come, how much time they spend, if they share their

experiences with their friends and relatives, etc. It was also important to ask the respondents what could help attracting more young people to the VMU Botanical Garden.

As this survey was designed to find out the opinion of young people aged between 16 and 29 years old about the attractiveness of VMU Botanical Garden for recreation and leisure purposes, the target population was selected for this survey. The term ‘*young people*’ was defined according to the Law on the Fundamentals of Youth Policy (2018). We interviewed the young people who have visited VMU Botanical Garden at least one time prior the survey. Totally, 73 respondents were interviewed. An anonymous online survey was organized: the questionnaire was posted on the website www.apklausa.lt in January-February of 2021. All participants voluntarily participated in this survey and were informed of its anonymity and confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the research, it was important to find out for what purpose young people most often visit VMU Botanical Garden (Figure 1). The responses received were very diverse and distributed evenly. The largest part (33 percent) of the respondents answered that they visit this botanical garden for a possibility to relax by walking and sitting; about 25 percent of the respondents said that they come there to see plant collections. About 10 percent of the respondents had chosen the following answers “spending free time with friends”, “participating in an event” and “staying in the fresh air”. Only 6 percent of the respondents liked an active walking and about 3 percent – participating in various educations. Additionally, some young people expressed their own experiences and indicated that they visit the VMU Botanical Garden for taking photos, video recordings or for scientific and learning purposes.

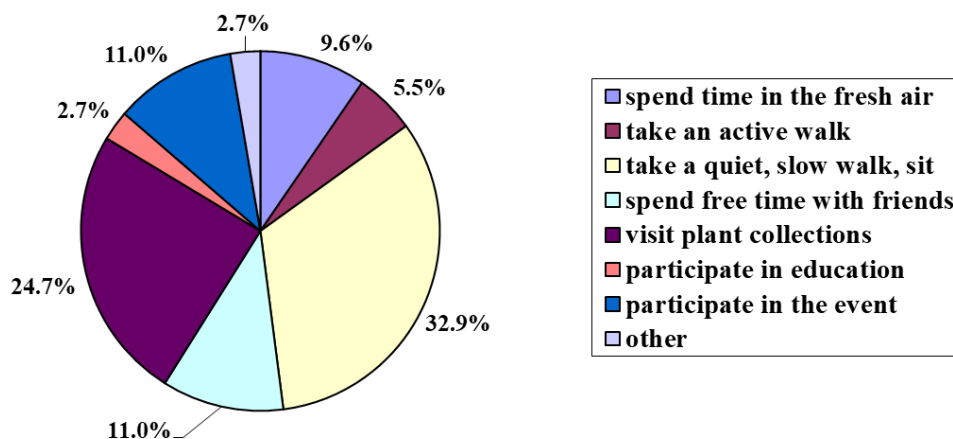


Figure 1. Distribution of the answers to the question "For what purpose do you usually visit VMU Botanical Garden?"

The survey showed that young people most often hear about VMU Botanical Garden from family members (27 percent), friends and colleagues (23 percent) and teachers or lecturers (22 percent) (Figure 2). Some respondents commented that they knew about VMU Botanical Garden because they lived nearby or liked the photos of friends in the beautiful environment of this garden. These survey findings allow us to conclude that to attract more young people to the VMU Botanical Garden, it would be necessary to provide more information on social networks, post videos or prepare TV reportages.

The participants of this survey were asked whether they had the opportunity to participate in the event organized by the VMU Botanical Garden (Figure 3). The majority (64 percent) of the respondents answered that they did not attend the events in this botanical garden but agreed that it would probably be interesting. About 21 percent of respondents indicated that they have participated in such events several times. A smaller proportion of the respondents (11 percent) had attended some events in this botanical garden only once. About 3 percent of young people indicated that nobody from their environment likes such kind of activities, and only few respondents said they did not want to participate in the events in this botanical garden.

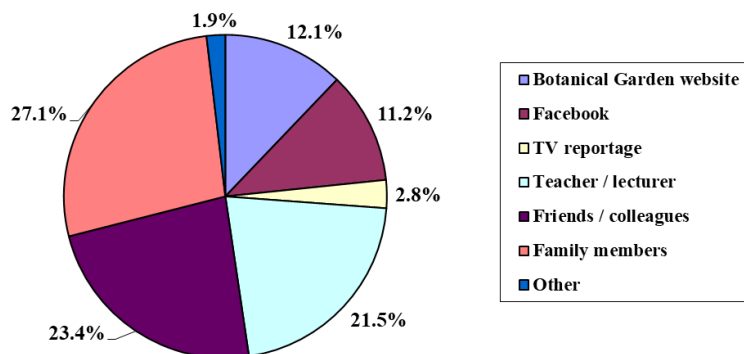


Figure 2. Distribution of the answers to the question “How did you find the information about VMU Botanical Garden?”

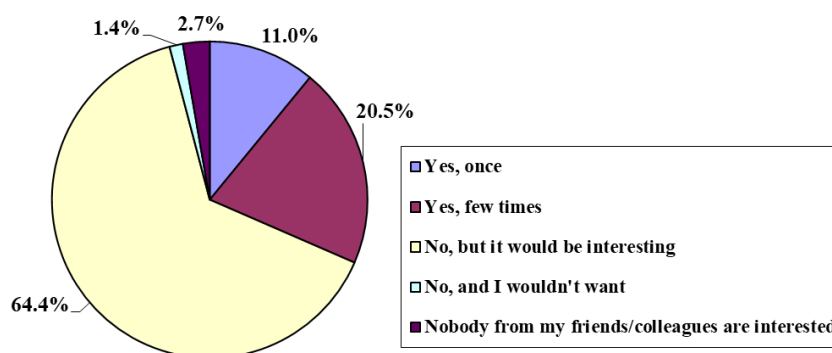


Figure 3. Distribution of the answers to the question “Have you ever participated in an event organized by VMU Botanical Garden?”

The study aimed to find out how 16-29-years old youth representatives assess VMU Botanical Garden. Therefore, the participants of this survey were asked four questions about their overall impression of the botanical garden, the variety of services provided, the environment and infrastructure, and safety. The respondents were asked to choose one of five answers: no opinion, didn't like, absolutely didn't like, really liked, and liked (Table 1).

Table 1

Answer	Distribution of respondents' answers (percent)			
	Respondents were asked the questions “How do you assess VMU Botanical Garden ...”			
	overall impression?”	diversity of services?”	environment & infrastructure?”	safety?”
no opinion	5.5	45.2	16.4	26.0
didn't like	0.0	2.7	1.4	1.4
absolutely didn't like	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
really liked	37.0	12.3	21.9	35.6
liked	57.5	39.7	60.3	37.0

Table 1 shows that there were no respondents who completely didn't like visiting this botanical garden. About 37–40 percent of the respondents indicated that they liked the diversity of services and safety of this botanical garden. Most of the respondents (58–60 percent) liked this botanical garden in general, also its environment and infrastructure. Slightly lower part of the respondents indicated that they “really liked” this botanical garden, i.e., 12 percent of the respondents really liked the diversity of services, 22 percent - environment and infrastructure, and 36–37 percent – safety or liked this botanical garden in general. A significant part of the respondents did not have an opinion on the mentioned issues. The most difficult for the respondents was to assess the variety of services provided by VMU Botanical Garden – even 45 percent of the respondents indicated the answer “no opinion”.

When asked the respondents what would help to attract more young people to VMU Botanical Garden, the following answers were indicated: the possibility to stay closer to nature (41 percent), well-planned infrastructure (22 percent) and the possibility to combine active and passive recreation activities (14 percent). Lower part of the respondents indicated that botanical garden is attractive to them because it is

close to their home (7 percent), events are organized there (6 percent), and it is possible to organise personal party (5 percent).

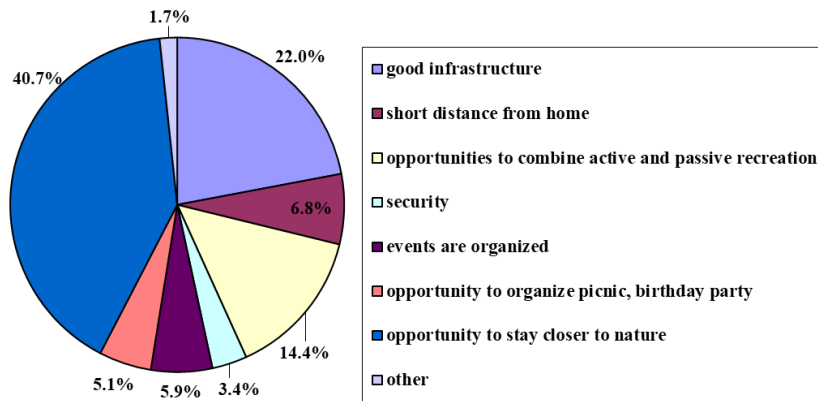


Figure 3. Distribution of the answers to the question “What makes VMU Botanical Garden the most attractive for you?”

The survey results showed that most of the respondents would visit VMU Botanical Garden more often if there were more music concerts organized (30 percent); the youth days with free entrance (22 percent) were organized. Also, 19% of the respondents would like to receive cheaper tickets or discounts for young people. The respondents were least interested in visiting the botanical garden due to meetings or conversations with famous people (12 percent), educations (11 percent) and opportunities to volunteer (about 3 percent).

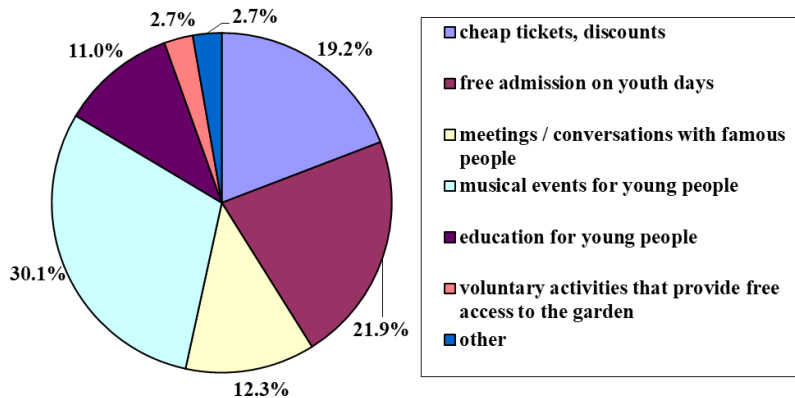


Figure 4. Distribution of the answers to the question “What activities would encourage you to visit VMU Botanical Garden more often?”

The participants of this survey had the opportunity to write themselves the aspects, which could attract more young people to the VMU Botanical Garden. The results showed that 16-29 years old people mostly are focused on entertainment content events (music events, festivals, picnics, film evenings), as well as educational events (plant presentations, educational programs offered by specialists and experts). Some of the respondents emphasized that they would visit VMU Botanical Garden more often if they could receive a discount for tickets for attendance and education, and if they found more information on social media. Overall, the results obtained in this survey showed that behaviour and expectations of young people to visit such institutions like botanical gardens were similar than those obtained in other studies. Previous studies indicated that there are many reasons why botanical gardens should attract young people. Some authors stated that early experience in nature influences subsequent attitudes toward the environment and concerns for its care and sustainability, and that effective outdoor learning can have a positive impact on a broader education, stimulating interest in academic achievements (Derewnicka, 2017). It is possible to involve young people into different programs. For example, the Explainer Program at New York Botanical Garden is a work-based educational program for high school students in the New York City area (Miles, 2017). Under this program, participants can gain knowledge and skills, develop curiosity, and explore. The program is implemented in collaboration with adults and the public. In 2014, the Botanical Garden of the Institute of Biology at UNAM created the „Adoption Center of Mexican Plants in Danger of Extinction“ with the objective of promoting education and conservation of rare plants (Balcázar et al., 2017). This program is

created for young people between the 13 and 18-years old. To adopt the plants, it is necessary to go to the Center, and there through a video and an infographic, the adoption process is explained. Later, various educational activities, like transplant workshops, visits to the greenhouses, etc., are organised to promote a dialogue between scientists and young people interested in conservation. For the communication, social networks, like Facebook and Twitter, are used to share the recommendations of plant care, curious facts about the various species, as well as a botanical glossary.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this survey showed that young people appreciate the variety and infrastructure of services provided by VMU Botanical Garden. Young people usually learn about VMU Botanical Garden from family members or friends, and a visit to this Botanical Garden is usually chosen because of the opportunity to spend time in nature.

The survey revealed that to attract young people to the VMU Botanical Garden can help higher activity in the social media. Young people would be interested in entertainment content events (musical events, festivals, picnics, film evenings), as well as educational programs. The received discounts for entrance and educations would also encourage visiting the botanical garden.

Based on the results of this survey, it could be recommended to create innovative educational programs for young people by applying smart technologies; offer educational activities and events to schools, non-formal education institutions, youth organizations in all regions of Lithuania, and more actively disseminate the new information about the activities in the form of short videos or messages on the social media.

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