

AHS MEMBERS MAKING A DIFFERENCE: Lolly Tai

by Stephanie George

ROUGHLY HALF the world's population lives in urban areas that are devoid of nature, according to the United Nations. By 2050, the number is estimated to be near 70 percent. Numerous studies show that nature deprivation can have all sorts of negative impacts on human well-being, particularly for children growing up without access to green spaces. Increases in violence, depression, and physical health problems are among such impacts.

For landscape architect Lolly Tai, there's no doubt that "connecting to nature is important to every facet of our health." She believes that sustainably designed gardens offer an effective solution to the increasing lack of nature in urban areas. She champions this message through her design work, her books, and in her role as a professor of landscape architecture at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

MAGICAL PLACES FOR EDUCATION AND EXPLORATION

Both before and after emigrating to Queens, New York, from Taiwan at the age of nine, Tai spent many hours exploring her family's backyard. This sparked her life-long passion for plants and nature and played a large role in her path to landscape architecture. "I have always had an appreciation for the natural world," she says. "So for me, it's never like work."

Children's relationships with gardens became a greater focus of her work when she got involved with a schoolyard design for Clemson Elementary in South Carolina several years ago. During the research phase of the project, she discovered "there was really nothing out there" about designing children's gardens and natural play areas.

This realization resulted in the idea for her first book, *Designing Outdoor Spaces for Children: Landscaping School-*



yards, Gardens, and Playgrounds, which she coauthored with three other landscape architects. Published in 2006, it has become a seminal handbook for landscape designers and educators.

Tai's recently published second book, *The Magic of Children's Gardens: Inspiring through Creative Design*, explores the relationships between design, children's development, and environmental stewardship. Each of the 19 innovative children's gardens profiled—including the one at the headquarters of the American Horticultural Society (AHS) in Alexandria, Virginia—"has something special about it," she says. She hopes the book will "inspire people to build their own rewarding relationships with nature."

VALUING NATURE

While gardens can be magical places for

young people to "get healthy and engaged with nature," Tai thinks they can serve a broader purpose of encouraging kids to value and protect the environment. Whether she's teaching others or creating her own designs, she emphasizes using natural elements such as water and structures made



Landscape architect Lolly Tai is the author of *The Magic of Children's Gardens*, published this year.

of wood and stone to prompt teachable moments about environmental issues such as resource conservation. Tai believes that momentum for creating these kinds of inspiring green spaces is growing in part because "the AHS and many other organizations are focusing on children and environmental issues," she says.

She especially enjoys attending the AHS's annual National Children & Youth Garden Symposium, which she feels is "an invaluable resource for learning and sharing ideas with others." In fact, at this year's symposium in the Pacific Northwest, she will be giving a talk on designing children's gardens using concepts discussed in her new book. When she returns home, she's looking forward to seeing where her love of nature will take her next.

Stephanie George is an editorial intern for The American Gardener.