

Learn about S’Klallam culture at this unique Native-owned public garden

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1 of 2 | These sculptures displayed at Haunted Heronswood tell the story of KeKaiax calling the salmon to him. The fish scales are made of rhododendron leaves. (Debby Purser)

By

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Hiding in a mist-wrapped trail at the S’Klallam-owned Heronswood Garden in Kingston, Kitsap County, you’ll find the black-tailed deer who stole fire for the people, hungry KeKaiax calling a stream of salmon to him, and the grasping claws of Slapu, the wild-haired woman who eats children who stay out after dark. These handcrafted figures honoring S’Klallam tribal stories only come out in October, as part of the “Haunted Heronswood” experience the garden puts on during the Halloween season.

Haunted Heronswood, which will take place on Oct. 20-21, is a spooky tour filled with surprises, and every week for six weeks leading up to the event, a new papier-mâché magical figure sprouts on the garden's paths, each honoring a different S'Klallam story. These figures are built with materials from the garden — for instance, rhododendron leaves stand in for fish scales, grasses for hair, and timber bamboo becomes an armature — and they are accompanied by QR codes that visitors can scan to either read or listen to as a recorded story told by tribal member Elaine Grinnell.



Skeleton and Jack-o-Lantern at Haunted Heronswood. (Debby Purser)

They're just one example of the creative ways Heronswood, which claims to be the only tribal-owned public garden in the U.S., has found to share the S'Klallam tribe's culture with the community.

Since the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe purchased Heronswood Garden at an auction in 2012, the garden has become a space for tribe members to celebrate their culture while also helping to educate the community at large.



A sculpture of Slapu in production for Haunted Heronswood. She stands over 9 feet tall and is made of timber bamboo and grasses, with a papier mache face, basket woven of cedar bark and sword fern fronds. (Debby Purser)

The 15-acre property on the Kitsap Peninsula was previously a nursery owned by plant explorer Dan Hinkley. According to Heronswood director Ross Bayton, the S’Klallam tribe often buys land that comes up for sale in the area because they’re interested in “resuming control of the land that used to be part of their territory.”

Under S’Klallam ownership and operation, Heronswood has evolved to include six gardens. Two of the six — the Formal Gardens whose clipped hedges overflow with colorful annuals, and the Woodland Gardens known for their hydrangea collections — predate the S’Klallam purchase. But overall, the gardens are helping

to tell the story of the S’Klallam through themes, plants and signage in the S’Klallam language.

The Rock Garden, created during the pandemic, showcases alpine plants. The Renaissance Garden that began in 2018 recreates an abandoned logging camp under a cedar canopy — a tree central to S’Klallam traditions. Still in progress, the paired S’Klallam Connections Garden and Travelers Garden jointly embrace a central camas meadow that explores the interwoven relationship between traditions and colonialism. The former highlights plants such as camas, cedar, berries and sweet grass that are used by the S’Klallam for food, medicine, building and crafts. The Travelers Garden explores plant hunting around the world.

“I think Heronswood offers a good shop window onto the tribe’s history and culture,” Bayton says.





1 of 2 | Long table Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe members making cedar wreaths at Heronswood Garden to give to the tribal paddlers arriving at the Paddle to Muckleshoot this summer. (Debby Purser)

While Heronswood’s leadership is always thinking about ways to bring in new visitors, they’ve also been mindful about ensuring the garden serves the needs of its tribal community.

The administration has tried to carefully toe the line between educating visitors about S’Klallam tradition while “not Disneyfying it,” Bayton says. For instance, the garden wants to share information on plants the S’Klallam has traditionally harvested, but doesn’t want to encourage the public to harvest increasingly scarce plants that are integral to the tribe’s culture and the ecosystem. So one idea being considered is the creation of a pamphlet on prairie care and harvesting that will be given out only to tribal visitors.

By being intentional in everything they do, Heronswood’s leadership has discovered creative ways to preserve and highlight S’Klallam culture.



Stories state that Slapu the ogress steals and eats children. (Debby Purser)
Meant to be a haven, the garden welcomes tribal members free of charge at any time.

“The tribe do view the garden very much as a safe place in which to encourage exercise [and] to encourage people to get and have social events together,” Bayton says. With a “fairly large proportion of elders,” Heronswood is committed to welcoming all ages and abilities, and is currently seeking grant funding to improve ADA compliance and add benches for resting.

Last year, Heronswood also held its first series of tribal classes. S’Klallam tribal members led workshops on weaving, safe harvesting and working with cedar bark,

beading and traditional S’Klallam crafts. Bayton says they hope to make classes for tribal members a regular feature at Heronswood.

“Working with wool, while in nature and with our people, brings so many good things,” said Kelly Sullivan, a Coast Salish wool weaver who participated in the workshops. “The discussions we have together bring fellowship and connection. The encounters we have with the garden visitors are positive and uplifting and bring us pride in sharing such a beautiful place.”

Héronswood is also part of the S’Klallam tribe’s re-entry work placement program that helps people who’ve had substance abuse issues or issues with the law get back to the workforce by working at the garden, Bayton said.

The tribe sometimes holds meetings at the garden too, because “it’s a nice, tranquil place for our staff to unwind and be,” says Karron McGrady, a S’Klallam tribal member, and the cultural and nutrition manager for the tribe’s early childhood program.



PGST members making cedar wreaths at Heronswood Garden to give to the tribal paddlers arriving at the Paddle to Muckleshoot this summer. (Debbie Purser)

The garden also hosts educational programs for tribal members that range from tours to summer camps and special events. Early childhood programs bring classes to Heronswood several times a week. A couple of times a year, the reservation's county library also holds "story walks" at Heronswood during which pages of a book or story written by a tribal member are copied and stationed throughout the garden and kids can follow the story as they go through the route.

"The children love to explore the garden," McGrady said. "They are learning so much about plants, trees and different animals that visit or live in the area. We host various family events at the garden to encourage outdoor exploration of our ancestral lands."

Tribal member and Heronswood volunteer coordinator Debbie Purser is planning a new kids-focused event for next year.

“Any way I can get people that light bulb moment of discovery or an ‘aaaah’ — that sense of overall calm,” says Purser, “it makes me excited to think about it.”