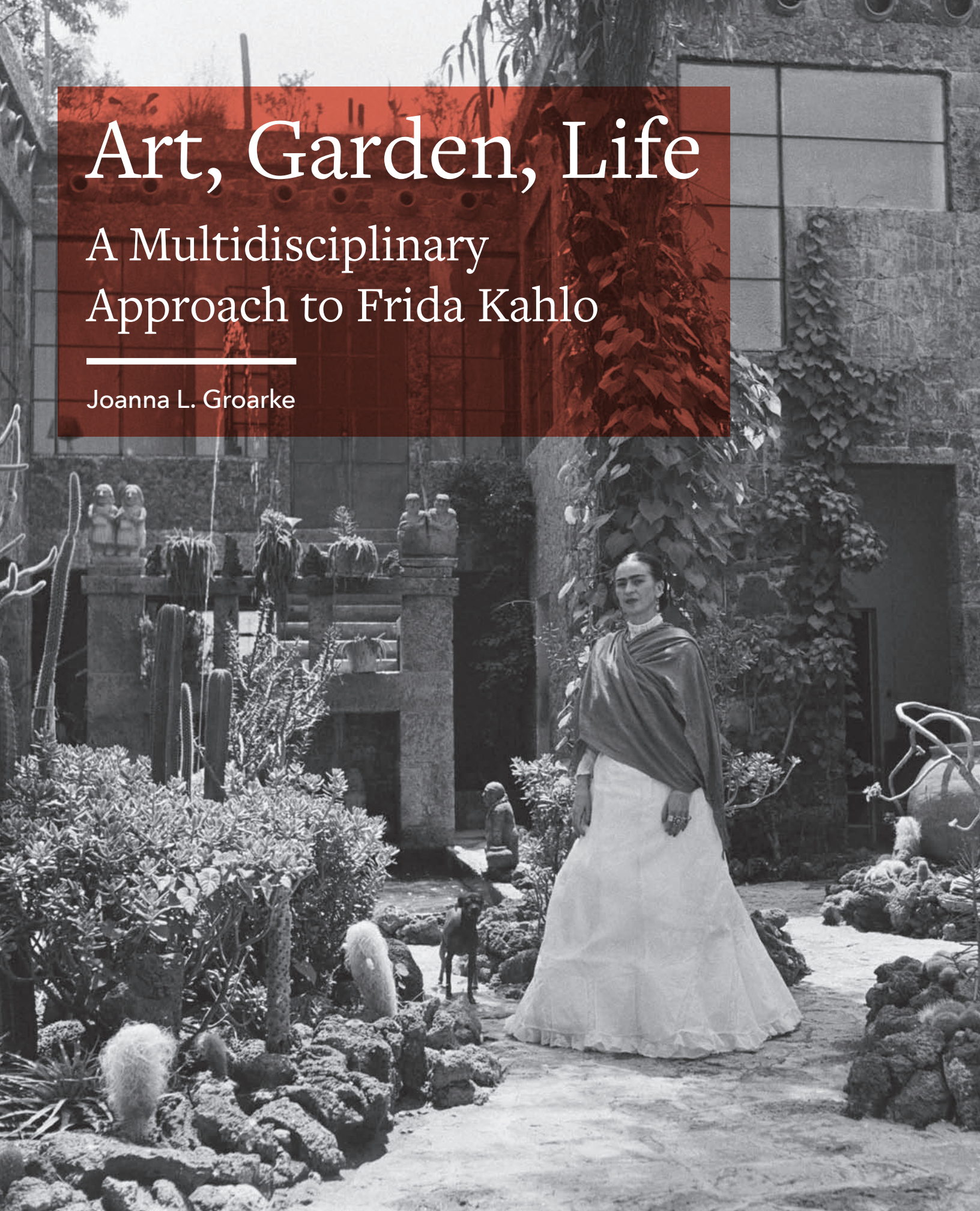


# Art, Garden, Life

## A Multidisciplinary Approach to Frida Kahlo

---

Joanna L. Groarke







left

Gisèle Freund,  
*Frida in the  
Garden, Casa  
Azul*, 1951.  
Courtesy  
Throckmorton  
Fine Arts. Gisèle  
Freund/IMEC/  
Fonds MCC.

At first blush, artist Frida Kahlo might seem an unlikely subject for an exhibition organized by The New York Botanical Garden, whose mission is to advocate for the plant kingdom. But *Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life* (May 16–November 1, 2015) turned out to be a perfect fit.

The exhibition was part of a longstanding series that demonstrated how thinking beyond the immediate constraints of “discipline” served our institutional mission at least as effectively as more traditional scientific exhibitions. Blending horticulture and the humanities, initially intended to make our science and conservation messages more widely appealing, offers our audiences a richer, more engaging experience. In the case of *Frida Kahlo*, it also allowed us to offer a new perspective on the work of one of the world’s most well-known artists. With each multidisciplinary exhibition in this series, Garden staff members have been inspired to develop ever more diverse and compelling ancillary exhibits, programs, and learning experiences.

#### **Setting a New Course with Hybrid Exhibitions**

The New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) has a long history in New York City. For 125 years, its scientists have collected, studied, and displayed living plant specimens. Today, the

Garden’s 250-acre, National Historic Landmark site is home to more than one million plants displayed in over 50 gardens and collections. Rainforest, desert, and aquatic plants thrive in the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory. Lush ornamental gardens and borders abound throughout the grounds. Distinguished collections of conifers, lilacs, maples, and more proliferate in every season. Specially designed gardens encourage children to explore nature and even provide an opportunity to grow and harvest vegetables. And 50 acres of uncut forest—the largest remnant of the woodlands that once covered the region—provide a natural refuge in New York City. More than 100 scientists conduct research in plant systematics, economic botany, ecology, molecular systematics, and plant genomics, using the resources of our laboratories, the William and Lynda Steere Herbarium, and the LuEsther T. Mertz Library. Educational programs for learners of all ages, levels of interest, and career phases teach everything from botanical drawing to landscape design and horticultural therapy.

In 2008, a planned Gallery exhibit of Charles Darwin's illustrated books, manuscripts, and other historical documents inspired Garden horticulturists to pay tribute to the great scientist's intense interest in plants through a complementary display in the Conservatory. Rather than focusing on his famous voyage to the Galapagos, the exhibit instead paid tribute to the beauty of Darwin's own English countryside home, Down House. Laboratory benches with interpreted re-creations of his plant-based experiments populated the glasshouse alongside beautiful plantings and an evocation of his home and study.

With this auspicious beginning, a series of exhibitions combining science and the humanities began to evolve. Each summer, a new humanities project examined the broader significance of plants. Exhibitions focusing on historical settings included Spain's Alhambra and the botanical garden of the University of Padua, the first botanical garden to be established in association with a medical school. Exhibitions on the gardens, lives, and work of such luminaries as scientist Charles Darwin, poet Emily Dickinson, and artist Claude Monet have brought to life the important role of plants in scientific discovery and artistic achievement. Each year, living exhibitions in the Conservatory, which combine carefully designed set pieces and plantings based on those found at the sites depicted, have been accompanied by

related exhibits of artworks, rare books, and objects in the Gallery. Over time, these Garden-wide exhibitions have yielded an ever-richer array of educational and cultural programming.

Individually, these exhibitions permit Garden curators, horticulturists, and scientists to showcase the most compelling plants of a region or era, to pay homage to the scientific and landscape design achievements of our forebears, to celebrate the unique qualities of some of the world's great gardens, to tell vital plant discovery and conservation stories, and in some cases, to offer new scholarly insight and increase popular appreciation for their subjects. Together, these hybrids have helped us advance our mission in new ways, and have offered our visitors engaging and poignant lessons in the power and importance of plants to human health and creativity.

The Garden's core exhibition team itself blends science and the humanities, comprising staff from the horticulture division and the library. Together, this group identifies guest curators whose scholarly expertise lends itself to the chosen subject. Curators lead the process of fleshing out key themes and identifying works of art or historical artifacts for the Gallery portion of the project. They often participate in discussions related to the Conservatory display as well. Once an exhibition is in development, other divisions,

including children's and public education, fundraising, marketing, and visitor services join the conversation at regular intervals. Together we refine and hone our messages for everything from focus group research sessions and press releases to interpretation and programming. It is a process that has encouraged greater creativity for our staff and created a more seamless experience for our visitors.

### **Focusing On Frida**

As part of this ambitious program of multidisciplinary exhibitions, we decided to feature Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), who is widely considered one of the most significant artists of the 20th century. Her unique blend of cosmopolitanism and populism, and her strong sense of identity—notably signified in the arresting imagery of her self-portraits—have been the subject of scholarly works and blockbuster exhibitions worldwide. Biographical and fictional books and films have told her story. She is a cultural icon and a symbol of empowerment to Latin American, feminist, and LGBTQ audiences. Her work has been celebrated, mimicked, and appropriated by accomplished contemporary artists and manufacturers of T-shirts and socks alike. Since the publication of Hayden Herrera's landmark biography in 1983 brought renewed attention to the artist's story,<sup>1</sup> it seems as if enthusiasm for Frida has never truly waned.

<sup>1</sup> Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

Kahlo's body of work is replete with plant imagery. Tropical and desert plants such as philodendrons and organ pipe cactus serve as backdrops to her self-portraits, a fanciful array of fruits figure prominently in her still lifes, and magnolias, sunflowers, twining vines, and other plants frequently appear in dream-like scenes inspired in part by Mexican *ex-votos* (artworks that are also religious offerings). As we surveyed Kahlo's work together with our guest curator, art historian Adriana Zavala, the visual evidence for her deep engagement with the natural world mounted. Yet there was very little research into this subject to draw upon. Kahlo's garden at her lifelong home, the Casa Azul (today the Museo Frida Kahlo) in the Coyoacán neighborhood of Mexico City had not been thoroughly documented.<sup>2</sup> Unlike our Monet exhibition, where we were able to draw upon letters written by the artist that chronicled his garden designs, along with surviving nursery purchase records, Kahlo's archives contained little concrete evidence of the plantings in her

<sup>2</sup> Notable exceptions include Juan Coronel Rivera's discussion of Kahlo's engagement with science and nature in his essay "The Forest of Images" in *Frida Kahlo: y sus mundos/and Her Worlds* (Mexico City: Editorial RM, 2006); Nancy Deffebach, "Images of Plants in the Art of María Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, and Leonora Carrington: Gender, Identity, and Spirituality in the Context of Modern Mexico," Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas, Austin; and British horticulturist Daniel Glass in "Once Upon a Time in Mexico: Frida Kahlo's Garden at La Casa Azul, Coyoacán," *Garden History* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2011), which cites a list of plants that may have grown in Kahlo's garden as discussed in an essay by Lic. Francisco Torres de la Peña of the Museo Dolores Olmedo, which maintains the Museo Frida Kahlo.

# [T]hese hybrids have helped us advance our mission in new ways....

garden. And unlike our Emily Dickinson exhibition, where we were able to turn to the poet's poems for descriptions of plants in her Amherst, Massachusetts garden, the only evidence we had for Kahlo's garden was found in some of her paintings and snapshots of the artist with friends and family in which the garden was a constant backdrop.

We had to dig deeper. We compared Kahlo's depictions to the plants we saw in photographs of her home and garden ([intro image](#)), and researched the types of plants she would have been able to purchase at her local market. Representatives from the Garden's horticulture and exhibitions departments traveled with Dr. Zavala to Mexico City to visit the Casa Azul, walked the

[Visitors] saw Kahlo in new contexts and gained new insights into her art—all while visiting a nontraditional arts venue: a botanical garden.

paths in Kahlo's garden (fig. 1), which she had designed together with her husband, muralist Diego Rivera), studied the view of the garden from her studio, took photographs, scribbled plant lists, and consulted with expert staff at the Museo Frida Kahlo, the Museo Dolores Olmedo (another institution with distinguished Kahlo and Rivera holdings), and other institutions.<sup>3</sup> A 1939 hand-drawn map of the home and garden by Kahlo, complete with specific plants identified (along with other archival materials from the Museo Frida Kahlo that have only come to light in the last decade) provided evidence to support our thesis.<sup>4</sup> Through our research, we came to two important realizations. Kahlo's garden plants were vitally important sources of inspiration and vehicles for powerful, even fantastical, statements about Mexican culture and her personal sense of identity. And, we knew that the material we'd uncovered was rich enough to support an exhibition of artwork and plants that, we believed, would shed new light on Kahlo's work by drawing upon our unique institutional expertise.

The lack of formal documentation of Kahlo's garden offered new

3 From the Museo Frida Kahlo, Lic Hilda Trujillo Soto, Director, and Humberto Spíndola were particularly helpful. Carlos Phillips Olmedo, Director of the Museo Dolores Olmedo, was another invaluable resource in the planning of this exhibition.

4 Following Kahlo's death, Rivera began the process of turning the Casa Azul into a museum. He sealed off a bathroom in the house after placing many of Kahlo's personal papers, photographs, objects, and clothing inside, and issued strict orders that it not be opened until 15 years following his death. Though he died in 1957, the room remained sealed until 2004.

research opportunities. Back in the Bronx, Garden scientists and horticulturists identified plants featured in Kahlo's paintings and her garden, often for the first time. Botanists from NYBG and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City and distinguished historians of Latin American art based throughout the United States analyzed her works and garden through consideration of the scientific, cultural, and art historical significance of the featured plants. Zavala and Garden curators devised a checklist of paintings, and began to correspond with potential lenders two years in advance of the exhibition's opening. The Garden's horticulturists developed designs for a re-created version of Kahlo's garden, and made a checklist of plants we had seen in the paintings, in the photographs of Kahlo's garden during her lifetime and today, and those our experts identified as culturally significant in Mexico, climatically appropriate, and beautiful. Once the plant list was created, gardeners in our production glasshouses began the multiyear process of growing and sourcing the thousands of plants required for an exhibit in the Conservatory. Experts in Mexican plants, landscape architecture, and urban planning advised us alongside Dr. Zavala and other art historians in the development of scholarly themes for the development of interpretation and the exhibition catalogue.<sup>5</sup>

5 Many of the members of our advisory committee and authors of exhibition catalogue essays were instrumental in helping us to shape the project, including Juan Rafael Coronel Rivera, Robert Bye, Edelmira Linares, and Kathryn E. O'Rourke.





fig. 1. The Casa Azul today, now the Museo Frida Kahlo.



**fig. 2.** The Conservatory exhibit evoked Kahlo's garden by juxtaposing the plants with walls painted the same cobalt blue (*azul añil*, a traditional color found throughout Mexican villages) that Kahlo used in her home, Casa Azul.



**fig. 3.** The Conservatory exhibit featured a re-creation of the pyramid based in pre-Hispanic precedents that Diego Rivera designed during a 1941 expansion of the garden at the Casa Azul.



Even as it built on the solid foundation of previous arts and humanities-based exhibitions, *Frida Kahlo* represented a watershed moment in the Garden's exhibition program because it brought together working experts in so many disparate fields to allow us to draw new conclusions about Kahlo's work. Because we lacked formal, detailed documentation of Kahlo's garden, we had to search for the answers. Research into the plants that would have been available during Kahlo's lifetime led us to learn that the spirit of nationalism in post-Revolutionary

Mexico had revived popular interest in nearly every aspect of Mexican culture—including native plants.<sup>6</sup> We were able to present an appropriate, but likely far more widespread and meaningful, selection of tropical foliage plants and cacti for our exhibition (many, but not all, native to Mexico). As visitors experienced

<sup>6</sup> Exhibition curator Adriana Zavala and contributors and advisors Robert Bye and Edelmira Linares of the Jardín Botánico del Instituto de Biología at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in Mexico City addressed this history in their essays in the exhibition's catalogue, *Frida Kahlo's Garden* (New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel and The New York Botanical Garden, 2015).

Ensuring that staff members from all areas of the institution were involved in planning was a key to our success.

an evocation of Kahlo's garden in the Conservatory, studied the plants that figured prominently in her work on display in the nearby Gallery, and learned about the process of shaping the garden and Kahlo's engagement with nature, they saw Kahlo in new contexts and gained new insights into her art—all while visiting a nontraditional arts venue: a botanical garden (figs. 2 & 3).

#### CREATING A MULTIFACETED EXPERIENCE

*Frida Kahlo* motivated Garden staff in each department to think differently and ask questions about every aspect of the visitor experience, from exhibitions and interpretation to programming and community outreach. As momentum built around the curatorial content, and as the multidisciplinary approach to Kahlo was positively received in focus groups and other forms of outreach, it became clear that we needed to prepare for the possibility of unprecedented visitation. As is typical for our hybrid science/humanities exhibitions, the living display in the Conservatory and fine art in the Gallery were conceived as just two of many related offerings that made *Frida Kahlo* a fully immersive experience. Inspired by Kahlo's embrace of all things Mexican, from pre-Hispanic art and myth to Tejuana dress to corridos to cuisine, we created smaller ancillary exhibits and programming experiences

throughout the Garden grounds. These not only allowed us to tease out the nuances of Kahlo's engagement with plants and Mexican culture, but also provided a means of serving a larger audience than ever before.

An installation of contemporary art inspired by Kahlo's paintings and manner of dress (fig. 4), and a small panel exhibit about sites in Mexico City that had inspired Kahlo and Rivera, broadened the exhibition experience. For the first time, a comprehensive program of bilingual interpretation, including signage, didactic labels, brochures, audio tours, and mobile guide, as well as bilingual press and marketing outreach, helped to make the Garden, situated in a diverse borough of New York City, more accessible to the 46.3 percent of Bronx residents who speak

fig. 4. Ancillary exhibits included a display of contemporary artist Humberto Spindola's *Las dos Fridas/ The Two Fridas*.

COURTESY THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN. IVO M. VERMEULEN





In terms of  
visitation,  
earned income,  
and engaging  
new audiences,  
*Frida Kahlo:  
Art, Garden, Life*  
was the most  
successful  
exhibition in  
The New York  
Botanical  
Garden's  
history.

Spanish at home. A poetry walk featured nature-inspired verses by Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz, printed on placards placed throughout the Garden landscape. A mobile website offered a tour of the exhibition via any device and invited visitors to style their “selfies” after Frida’s self-portraits, complete with flowers in their hair, and share them via social media. Dining options expanded on an unprecedented scale to include Mexican-inspired fare in our sit-down restaurant; in our more informal dining spaces, we included an outdoor cantina and a taco truck. Marketing and public relations outreach targeted a wider range of communities, focusing on Spanish-language publications and programs.

The Garden’s public education department created a broad array of programming. Festival weekends kicked off the exhibition and recurred with new themes at various points throughout the six-month run, celebrating the anniversary of Kahlo’s birth, Mexican Independence Day, and Día de los Muertos. Throughout the summer, each weekend offered music by the Villalobos Brothers, one of today’s leading contemporary Mexican music

**fig. 5.** Members of Calpulli Danza Mexicana, a New York-based dance company that promotes the diversity of Mexican and Mexican American culture, perform at The New York Botanical Garden during a festival weekend in summer 2015.

ensembles, our artists-in-residence, and other performers (**fig. 5**); demonstrations by artisan weavers and gourd carvers from Chiapas and Oaxaca; a Mexican film series; and children’s programming. These programs were dispersed over a wider area of the grounds than ever before, and, in the case of some of the celebrated mariachi troupes that performed, moved from place to place. Programming for this exhibition expanded far beyond what had ever been attempted before, and, as the audience continued to grow, eventually reaching 525,000, the reaction to the lively assortment of activities was overwhelmingly positive.

In terms of visitation, earned income, and engaging new audiences, *Frida Kahlo: Art, Garden, Life* was the most successful exhibition in The New York Botanical Garden’s history. It was the most notable demonstration to date of how we employ complex material—scientific, historical, artistic—to create exhibitions supported by multifaceted programming, dining, and even souvenir-shopping experiences. The result was an exhibition that offered something for anyone of any age and any level of comfort with botanical and art historical content while maintaining the



COURTESY THE NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN. BEN HIDER



# In developing this exhibition, we were forced to ask hard questions and find creative answers that drew on the expertise of many disciplines.

highest standards of scholarship and professionalism.

It was also the most successful exhibition to date in terms of developing a comprehensive and engaging visitor experience. Evaluation revealed that our multifaceted approach to exhibits and programming offered visitors an enjoyable and educational experience. Bilingual interpretation, diverse programming, and a range of dining options were positively received. *Frida Kahlo* was an enormous success from a visitation perspective, attracting over half a million visitors in six months, and a more diverse group of visitors than ever before. In addition to reaching unprecedented audiences, the exhibition also contributed a fresh scholarly perspective from a seemingly unlikely source.

In developing this exhibition, we were forced to ask hard questions and find creative answers that drew on the expertise of many disciplines. The answers have left an indelible mark on the exhibition program at the institution. Ensuring that staff members from all areas of the institution were involved in planning was a key to

our success. So was the decision to partner with advisors in science and the humanities who could help us to ensure that our portrayals of Kahlo's biography—and Mexican culture—were culturally appropriate and sensitive. Allowing the content to dictate the tone of all components of the exhibition, which in Kahlo's case meant embracing not only her rigorous scientific and artistic interests, but also her love of kitsch and her sly humor, resulted in an exhibition that was both intellectually stimulating and a pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

In the end, the choice to mount a Frida Kahlo exhibition in the seemingly unlikely venue of a botanical garden proved altogether natural. We hope that our process might serve as an example for other museums of how new educational opportunities can arise when new perspectives on well-known subjects are revealed through an interdisciplinary lens in a “nontraditional” venue. ■

---

**Joanna L. Groarke** is Director of Public Engagement and Library Exhibitions Curator at The New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx. [jgroarke@nybg.org](mailto:jgroarke@nybg.org)