



President and Chief Executive Officer
Chicago Botanic Garden
Glencoe, Illinois

The Chicago Botanic Garden (“the Garden”), a world-class destination and a Chicago civic and cultural institution as well as an international leader in plant science, seeks a dynamic champion of its mission to connect plants, people, and planet. The President and CEO will lead the organization to its highest aspirations in its next chapter, further growing its impact across Cook County and the greater Chicago region while concurrently elevating its stature as one of the world’s premier display gardens, a national model in urban agriculture, and a globally recognized center of plant biology and conservation science.

In 2024, the Garden enjoyed more than 1.3 million visits to its main campus in Glencoe, Illinois, which is beautifully situated on 385 acres owned by its partner, the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The Garden operations include 28 display gardens, six miles of lake shoreline, nine islands, including a renowned Japanese garden and bonsai collection, as well as a visitor center, learning center, plant conservation science center, public and production greenhouses, and 12 urban farms on Chicago’s south and west sides. It is also one of the few botanic gardens accredited by the American Alliance of Museums and has nearly 60,000 member households - one of the largest memberships of any garden in the world. The Garden will co-host the 9th Global Botanic Gardens Congress to be held in Chicago in 2027, a superb opportunity for the CEO to lead efforts to highlight the Garden, expand its brand and reach, and deepen its impact.

The Board seeks a President and CEO who will advance a bold and inclusive vision for the institution, energize donor-members, volunteers, and Chicagoland community stakeholders, generate support for the Garden’s mission, and set ambitious plans for the future. This next leader will uplift the Garden’s scientific and educational contributions and continue to strengthen the organization as a civic and cultural resource that makes significant contributions to the Chicagoland region. The Garden, under the leadership of its next President and CEO, will effectively and persuasively communicate its mission and the breadth of its work and impact, advocate for resources, and envision new pathways for innovation and partnerships. This critical work will ensure the Garden is accessible and relevant to a wide range of audiences, from Chicago residents who have never visited a display garden or engaged with urban agriculture to top global scientists in the field.

Isaacson, Miller, a global executive search firm, has been retained to support the Chicago Botanic Garden in this consequential search. Confidential inquiries, nominations, and applications may be directed to the firm as indicated at the end of this document.

ABOUT CHICAGO BOTANIC GARDEN

The Chicago Botanic Garden traces its origins back to the Chicago Horticultural Society, founded in 1890, whose motto was *Urbs in Horto*, meaning "city in a garden". In 1962, its modern history began when the Society agreed to help create, curate and operate a new public garden in partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County. The Garden is an independent nonprofit organization run as a public/private partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County with the Chicago Horticultural Society managing the Garden on land owned by the Forest Preserves of Cook County. Since the groundbreaking for the Chicago Botanic Garden in 1965 and its opening in 1972, the Horticultural Society has benefited from a permanent site on which to carry out its mission. In 53 years, it has matured into one of the world's greatest living museums with impressive programs in plant science, urban agriculture, and a multi-faceted educational curriculum.

The Garden's [Negaunee Institute for Plant Conservation Science](#) is a national and international leader in plant conservation and environmental restoration. Its scientists and graduate students conduct a wide array of plant conservation research. The Garden also operates [Windy City Harvest](#), a national model for urban agriculture, with 12 locations in the city of Chicago, including its flagship Farm on Ogden in the North Lawndale neighborhood. Windy City Harvest focuses on workplace development and the health benefits of eating locally grown produce. Through its education programs, including the [Regenstein School](#), the Garden also offers educational programming and classes geared to students from pre-K through PhD, and it offers M.A. and PhD programs in plant biology and conservation in concert with Northwestern University. The Garden's [Lenhardt Library](#) contains 110,000 volumes, including one of the nation's best collections of rare botanical books.

Mission and Strategic Plan

The Chicago Botanic Garden's statement of purpose is *to connect people to the power of plants so that people and planet may thrive*. To cultivate the power of plants to sustain and enrich life, the Garden helps build healthier communities through urban agriculture, offers lifelong learning opportunities, leads pioneering plant conservation research, and showcases the beauty of horticulture.

The Garden's ambition is to earn global recognition for the positive impact its nature-based initiatives have in shaping how people experience, value, and care for the planet. Its [Strategic Plan](#) is widely embraced across the Garden and guides its work through 2028. The plan is based on five main strategic imperatives:

- Expand and deepen the Garden's local, national, and global reach through the full breadth of the Garden's work.
- Develop and adapt the main campus for greater relevance, resilience, and guest experience.
- Grow the Garden's Chicagoland presence through platforms for partnerships.
- Establish the Garden as a global leader for plant conservation science and restoration.
- Establish long-term financial and operational sustainability and a thriving organizational culture.

A key goal in accomplishing the plan is to build visibility, awareness, and access, increasing the number of visitors and participants across all of the Garden's programming and locations. The plan emphasizes specific aspirations for the main campus, increasing its Chicagoland presence and partnerships, and growing contributions to global plant science.

The ambition described in the 2024-2028 Strategic Plan is anticipated to necessitate a major fundraising campaign for the Garden. Previous campaigns have been highly successful, with the last one ending in 2020 having raised nearly \$140 million. This next campaign will be in addition to the Garden's annual and very successful ongoing fundraising operation.

Operations and Governance

The Chicago Botanic Garden's annual operating budget is \$65 million, and its annual capital expenditures average \$4 million. To date, major capital projects have ranged between \$5 million and \$30 million.

The Garden employs 270 full- and part-time employees, 430 seasonal workers, and more than 800 volunteers. The Garden also has an active MBE/WBE policy with respect to vendors and service providers. The President and CEO supervises an [Executive Leadership Team](#) comprised of the Executive Vice President and Director of the Garden; Chief Finance Officer; VP of Human Resources; VP of Marketing; Chief Development Officer; Chief Information Officer; Chief Scientist; VP of Learning and Public Programs; and VP of Community Partnerships. The leadership team meets weekly regarding strategic decision-making for the Garden.

The Garden is governed by a [Board of Directors](#) that actively oversees the Garden's operations and makes available their experience and expertise to Garden management. The President and CEO of the Garden reports to the Board of Directors and the Board Chair. The 68-member board uses a committee structure to optimize Board members' time, focus, and expertise, and Directors exercise their responsibilities through service on various administrative and operational Board committees. The executive committee engages with the President and CEO on key decisions. The Board reflects the Garden's many constituencies and its long-standing and deep commitment to diversity and inclusion in every aspect of its operations.

In addition to the Board of Directors, the Garden also benefits from a [Women's Board](#), which was instrumental in founding the Garden and whose members are engaged in many hands-on and volunteer activities at the Garden's main campus and various sites in the region.

THE OPPORTUNITY AND KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

As it looks ahead to its second half-century of operation, the Chicago Botanic Garden and its next leader can harness its considerable strengths as a boldly ambitious and world-class organization firmly rooted in Chicago. The Garden today is in a strong position, having made strategic decisions to optimize revenue sources, including a recent move to an admission fee, participation in a successful public referendum for additional funding for the Cook County Forest Preserves, and creation of new flagship events such as “Lightscape.” The Garden’s next leader will look with fresh eyes to help the Garden realize its exciting vision and earn local and global recognition for the positive impact its nature-based initiatives have in shaping how people experience, value, and care for the planet. The President and CEO will be expected to address the following opportunities and key responsibilities in the coming years:

Collaboratively lead the execution of the 2024 strategic plan, including the appropriate comprehensive campaign to help realize its ambition.

The President and CEO will be an energetic leader who can think strategically about the Garden’s future. They will lead with an inspiring vision and advance the Garden’s strategic plan, working closely with various constituents and external partners on its successful implementation and evaluation efforts. They will be comfortable with complexity and committed to working collaboratively through challenges to achieve the Garden’s goals.

The President and CEO will:

- Bring the next chapter of bold and visionary leadership to all areas of the Garden’s operations and expand its impact locally, nationally, and internationally.
- Establish priorities and bring innovative ideas for how the Garden implements the plan.
- Set forth key objectives and articulate tactics to meet institutional goals.
- Measure and monitor progress in implementation.
- Ensure that the mission and core values of the Garden are put into practice throughout the strategic plan and annual operating plan execution.

Effectively manage the Garden’s operations.

The President and CEO will demonstrate outstanding financial and people stewardship, and will successfully manage the operating budget, annual capital expenditures, the successful completion of large capital projects on time and within budget, and will lead the Garden’s staff, volunteers, and operations in accordance with the Garden’s values and goals. Exhibiting outstanding judgement, they will engage appropriate stakeholders in decision-making while demonstrating the ability to make and implement difficult financial decisions as necessary.

The President and CEO will:

- Serve as the lead arbiter of the Garden’s aesthetic standards while understanding the history of landscape design, architecture, and event execution to ensure that all aesthetic/design choices meet the Garden standards and style and set ever-higher goals for the future.
- Foster a culture of continuous improvement, enabling the potential for new innovations, practices, and programming to take hold.

- Support the Garden’s culture of excellence and respect by promoting accountability and ensuring that team members have the tools to succeed for achieving their objectives and delivering on key initiatives.
- Utilize organizational development tools and methodologies to regularly assess and align organizational health, leadership team effectiveness, employee satisfaction, and morale to support and drive strategic objectives.

Blend effective fiscal management and robust fundraising to generate revenue and support Garden programs and plans.

With appropriate staff and board leaders, the President and CEO will bring energy and focus to revenue generation opportunities and develop a program to successfully complete capital and endowment campaigns necessary to realize the vision of the Strategic Plan. Enhancing and sustaining funding is a keen priority for the next President and CEO, including further growing the resources that will enable the garden to increase access and inclusion for all people of Cook County, and ensuring that the urban agriculture, science, and education programs remain fully supported. The next leader will be poised to think strategically about current threats to federal funding and the potential loss of federal dollars, especially in the Garden’s scientific and community endeavors.

The President and CEO will:

- Generate new paths to grow endowment, capital, and operating revenue to sustain the Garden into the future.
- Along with the Board and staff, and the Garden’s outsourced Chief Investment Officer, manage the Garden’s \$170 million endowment.
- Lead the development and execution of a successful, comprehensive campaign.
- Focus on the financial sustainability of integral programs that advance the Garden’s strategic goals, including Windy City Harvest, science, and education programs.

Be an outstanding ambassador and champion for the Garden.

The Garden is a beloved Chicago institution with a respected reputation in the city and the botanic world and there is a great opportunity to continue to expand the institution’s brand, recognition, and audience. The President and CEO will be a high-energy, charismatic leader with the ability to develop a powerful sense of confidence and shared purpose in others. They will serve as an “Ambassador” for the Garden, sharing the mission and vision with the outside world and helping to expand the Garden’s role more broadly. The President and CEO will have exceptional interpersonal skills with the ability to build and sustain strong support across a wide range of stakeholders, including staff, Board, donors, and the public. They will be politically astute and attuned with a sophisticated personal presence.

The President and CEO will:

- Represent and advocate for the Garden as an international leader in horticulture, plant conservation biology, public programs, and urban agriculture and horticulture jobs training and education (from pre-K through PhD), emphasizing support of diverse and under-resourced communities including providing opportunities to constituents in food deserts (e.g., Windy City Harvest), schools/universities (e.g.,

Northwestern University), hospitals, correctional institutions, and rehabilitation centers (e.g., horticultural therapy).

- Promote the Garden through public speaking, media interviews, writing opinion pieces, and attending events throughout the world.
- Partner with elected officials and administrators of governmental units at the local, state, and national levels.
- Provide leadership in international policy, conservation, and botanic garden alliances and associations.
- With the Chair of the Board, lead four Board of Directors meetings per year and speak periodically to other key stakeholder groups such as the Women's Board and the Forest Preserves of Cook County.
- Help co-host the 9th Global Botanic Gardens Congress to be held in Chicago in 2027.

Partner effectively with the Boards of the Garden.

Two of the Garden's greatest assets are its engaged and passionate Boards, and the CEO will manage strong and productive relationships with the Board of Directors and the Women's Board. In addition, the CEO works very closely with the General Superintendent and the Board of Commissioners of the Forest Preserves of Cook County. They will exercise best practices in governance and ethics and in all ways that will best serve the Garden's mission and goals.

The President and CEO will:

- Utilize the boards' expertise and relationships. Be open to ideas, new approaches, and outside assistance in select areas while clearly separating governance from management to allow the staff to function effectively.
- Communicate in a timely and effective manner. Provide accurate and timely financial and operating metrics.
- Contribute, with the Garden's senior team, Board Chair, and Board of Directors, to the effective practice of the following committees of the Board: Executive; Audit; HR and Compensation; Finance and Investment; Nominating and Governance; Development; Government Affairs; Science and Education; Buildings, Gardens, and Visitor Experience.

Retain, coach, and hire the Garden's management team, plan for succession, and be an inclusive leader across all parts of the Garden's team

The President and CEO will be an inclusive leader who supports a culture of collaboration and accountability among the Garden's Board and staff. They will be able to work well with others and have a deep understanding of the complexities of the Garden. The President and CEO will be a mature leader who embodies humility, wisdom, and strength of character. They will actively engage the Garden's key stakeholders and will build trust among the Board and staff, supporting a culture of consensus-building. The President and CEO will model exceptional communication skills and work with the senior team to continue to break down silos and to encourage holistic, broad collaboration and vision across the team.

The President and CEO will:

- Build and retain an A-player management team, focusing on talent development, cross-team collaboration, and succession planning. Quickly establish positive working relationships and lead the team to ensure near-

term continuity.

- Evaluate the quality and capabilities of existing talent and develop a plan to ensure high-quality leadership throughout the organization.
- Ensure there is a recruiting, assessment, and ongoing development process in place to prevent gaps in key roles that would hinder the Garden's execution and growth.
- Embody a culture of mutual respect, demonstrating unquestioned integrity, ethics, and values; someone who can be trusted without reservation.

Qualifications

The desired candidate will exhibit the following ideal experiences and track record:

- Strategic museum/cultural non-profit, corporate, or government leadership; has led an organization of similar complexity and significance and has transformed its level of influence in its respective communities and progressed in successful roles of increasing responsibility.
- Varied cross-sector experience to bring the perspectives needed for effective problem-solving and to influence the Garden's stakeholders.
- Demonstrated history of strong collaboration with a Board of Directors.
- Experienced in building collaborative relationships with other cultural institutions and government entities.
- Played a significant role in a successful capital fundraising campaign.
- Modernized and improved the relevancy of an engaging guest experience along with inclusivity and growth.
- Developed a long-term vision for an organization and effectively implemented the vision.
- Grew a modern, welcoming, vibrant brand as a passionate ambassador of a cause.
- Developed and championed a culture of inclusion and talent development.
- Expanded an organization's global, national, and local influence and collaborative geographic partnerships.
- Built and sustained strong operating processes and systems, resulting in operational viability and sustainability.
- An advanced degree in a related field, such as botany, management, public policy, or government affairs, is preferred.

COMPENSATION & LOCATION

The anticipated compensation for this position is \$450,000-\$550,000, which will be competitive and commensurate with experience. The President and CEO is expected to have a regular presence at the Garden, ensuring visibility and accessibility with both staff and the community. Periodic travel for conferences, events, and network building is expected.

APPLICATIONS, NOMINATIONS & INQUIRIES

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the search process is completed. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and applications with resumes and letters of interest should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website for the search. Electronic submission is strongly encouraged.

Jeff Kessner, Jackie Mildner, Nella Young, and Pamela Carty
Isaacson, Miller

<https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/chicago-botanic-garden/president-and-chief-executive-officer>

The Garden does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, age, marital status, sex, pregnancy, national origin, ancestry, religion, disability, genetic information, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, parental status, marital status, citizenship status, military or veteran status, or any other characteristic or status protected by applicable federal, state, or local law. In addition, the Garden complies with its obligations as a federal contractor, including, but not limited to, its obligations under laws governing affirmative action.