Outdoor Learning Symposium 2026 Schedule-at-a-Glance

November 3, 2026 at Fernbank Science Center, Atlanta

8:00-8:30	**Check-in, Networking, Exhibits**						
8:30-8:50	**Welcome and OLS Kickoff** Mike Kahle, OLS Coordinator, Janetta Greenwood, Director of Fernbank Science Center						
	Classroom 1 (Main Bldg)	**Elec Microscope Lab** (Main)	**Bird Room** (Annex)	**Classroom 2** (Main Bldg)	**Media Center** (Main Bldg)	**Ecology Lab** (Annex)	**Meteorology Lab** (Main Bldg)
9:00-9:55	**Lindsay Vines** Playful Pathways **Nature as Developmental Classroom**		**Tim Cornish** Oatland Island Wildlife Ctr w/ Stephanie West **Constructing Meaning Outdoors: Literacy-Infused Science Learning**		**Jerry Hightower** Natl Park Service, w/ Penny Hightower **Cattails, Muck, and Swamp Stuff**	**Jonah McDonald** Just Language in Ecology Education w/ Danielle Bunch, Sam Cramer **Rethinking 'Invasive': Integrating Just Language in EE**	
10:00-10:55		**Ashlyn Nealis** Savannah Children's Museum STEAM Center / Coastal Heritage Society **Guide to Heritage Gardening**					
11:00-11:55	**Starr Whitten** Trees Atlanta **Project ACER: Model for Student-Led Canopy and Climate Change Research**			**Mark Ray** RayEA, LLC Ecological Application w/ Larry and Laurie Alvord **A Fast-paced, 4-part Primer on Bats & Bat Boxes**	**EEA Board and Staff** **'Best Practices for Teaching Outdoors"** ~ an interactive session soliciting your feedback on this draft		**Dajawn Williams** Eco-Addendum; KSU **Encompassing Environmental Education in Everything!**
12:00-12:45	**Lunch - Pick up Box Lunch in Lobby / Visit Exhibits and Fernbank Forest**						
12:45-1:10	**Keynote Address: Jerry Hightower** Environmental Education Coordinator, National Park Service in Planetarium						
1:15-2:10	**Maya McKenzie** Atlanta Public Schools **Storytelling for Ecojustice**			**Kyla Sankara** Fernbank Science Center **Ozone Bioindicator Gardens**	**Penny Hightower** PPC Group w/ Joan Gopin **Mindfulness for the Outdoor Learning Area**	**Angelle Cooper** Roots & Shoots / Jane Goodall Institute **Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots 4-Step Formula**	
2:15-3:10		**Mary Anne Lane** Georgia Public Broadcasting **H2Woah! I Didn't Know Georgia Public Broadcasting Offered That!**	**Dan Bulger** Fernbank Science Center **Where Wild Things Grow: Carnivorous Plants**				
3:15-3:30	**Closing Event with Door Prizes in the Planetarium / GO VOTE!**						
4:30-6:00	**EEA Board Meeting and Dinner**						

Outdoor Learning Symposium 2026 Session Descriptions (alphabetical by title)

A FAST-PACED, FOUR-PART PRIMER ON BATS AND BAT BOXES 11:00 - 11:55 in Classroom 2 (Main)

Mark Ray, Principal, RayEA, LLC Ecological Applications; Co-presenters **Larry and Laurie Alvord**, GA Master Naturalists

We will review the current diversity and ecology of the 16 species of bats that inhabit Georgia. The first ever Georgia Bat Working Group Bridge Blitz results will also be shared. We will review how to "Garden for Bats" at your homes and schools. Lastly, Laurie and Larry Alvord (UGA Extension Master Naturalists) will share brand new research results on an improved design and placement of bat boxes for our Georgia climate. Come hang out with us and think like a bat**!**

Best Practices for Teaching Outdoors 11:00 - 11:55 in Media Center (Main)

EEA Board and Staff

Teaching outdoors improves children's mental and physical health while sparking curiosity, increasing attention spans, and resulting in academic gains. But what "dose" of nature is enough? Which instructional strategies are most effective? Where can nature investigations take place in an asphalt-covered schoolyard? And how can educators overcome obstacles to get kids outside? Join the EEA board and staff for a review of the proposed new 'Guidelines for Excellence in Teaching Outdoors' and share your feedback, insights and experience to improve this draft toolkit.

Cattails, Muck and Swamp Stuff 9:00 - 10:55 in Media Center (Main)

Jerry Hightower, Environmental Ed Coord, National Park Service / Co-presenters **Penny Hightower**

Discover the amazing lessons found in wetlands, even a wet roadside ditch can yield a bounty of exciting learning and discovery resources. Dissect cattails and learn of the wonder of their structures and historic uses, create with wetland muck, and learn a bit more about the plants that can inhabit a small wetland garden.

Constructing Meaning Outdoors: Literacy-Infused Science Learning in Nature Centers 9:00 - 10:55

Tim Cornish, Certified Teacher, Oatland Island Wildlife Center / Co-Presenter **Stephanie West** in Bird Room (Annex)

This workshop explores how nature centers can intentionally integrate literacy and science learning through experiential, standards-aligned outdoor investigations. Participants will learn practical strategies for building background knowledge, academic vocabulary, reading comprehension, and scientific thinking while maintaining student curiosity and engagement.

Encompassing Environmental Education in Everything! 11:00 - 11:55 in Meteorology Lab (Main)

Dajawn Williams, Environmental Educator, EcoAddendum and Kennesaw State University

This session will explore how outdoor education programming can align with Georgia-specific educational standards while creating meaningful opportunities for environmental stewardship. I will highlight how engaging students, faculty, staff, and community groups through place-based education can strengthen environmental knowledge, participation, and connection to local ecosystems.

Guide to Heritage Gardening 10:00 - 10:55 in Electron Microscope Lab (Main)

Ashlyn Nealis, Lead STEAM Educator, Savannah Children's Museum STEAM Center / Coastal Heritage Society

Heritage Gardening is founded in habitat management techniques focused on both ecological and historical conservation. There will be a short video/PowerPoint presentation explaining the origin and implementation of heritage gardening. Followed by a guided plant talk outside with take-home plants for participants to begin/diversify their outdoor(or garden) teaching environment.

H2Woah! I Didn't Know Georgia Public Broadcasting Offered That! 2:15 - 3:10 in Elec Microscope Lab (Main)

Mary Anne Lane, Director of Educational Content, Georgia Public Broadcasting

Discover Georgia's water story through GPB's Georgia Water Virtual Learning Journey, an interactive experience featuring virtual reality, videos, maps, graphics, and more. Developed with certified teachers and water experts, the resource explores Georgia's water systems, conservation, weather, and careers. The session includes a hands-on demonstration of classroom-ready activities

Jane Goodall's Roots & Shoots 4-Step Formula for Making a Difference 1:15-3:10 in EcoLab (Annex)

Angelle Cooper, Atlanta Basecamp Coordinator, Roots & Shoots/Jane Goodall Institute

The Roots & Shoots 4-step formula helps young people understand the interconnectivity between people, animals and the environment and empowers them to take action by creating community projects that make a difference!

Keynote Address 12:45 - 1:10 in Planetarium

Jerry Hightower, Environmental Education Coordinator, National Park Service

With 50+ years of experience as a naturalist and environmental educator, Jerry Hightower is an award-winning legend whose expertise, technical assistance, insights, and storytelling have shaped generations of young educators and strengthened the field of environmental and outdoor learning. His keynote address is sure to inspire and motivate us all, as we leverage the power of nature with the potential of children to become stewards of the natural world.

Mindfulness for the Outdoor Learning Area 1:15 - 3:10 in Media Center (Main) and then Fernbank Forest

Penny Hightower, CEO, PPC Group / Co-presenter Joan Gopin

Discover the importance of mindfulness in your outdoor teaching with exercises in light stretching and breathing followed by slowly walking paths connecting with nature. We will do some Qi gong (similar to Tai Chi) to deepen our relaxation and connections to nature and ourselves. Bring a towel or yoga mat to increase your comfort.

Nature as a Developmental Classroom 9:00 - 9:55 in Classroom 1 (Main)

Lindsay Vines, Learning Scientist & Developmental Specialist, Playful Pathways Developmental Consulting

Outdoor environments are rich with naturally occurring opportunities for children to develop foundational skills. This interactive session equips educators with a developmental framework and practical strategies to intentionally recognize and extend these opportunities, strengthening executive functioning, self-regulation, communication, motor development, and problem-solving through everyday outdoor learning.

Ozone Bioindicator Gardens 1:15 - 2:10 in Classroom 2 (Main)

Kyla Sankara, Instructional Specialist, Fernbank Science Center, DeKalb County School District

Explore ground-level ozone science through NCAR's Ozone Garden Project in this hands-on session. Participants will learn to identify bioindicator plant damage and practice collecting real-world environmental data directly in the garden. Leave equipped with actionable community science strategies for your learners.

Project ACER: Model for Student-Led Canopy & Climate Change Research 11:00-11:55 in Classrm 1

Starr Whitten, Youth Education Senior Manager and **Marley Kern**, Youth Education Coordinator, Trees Atlanta

Trees Atlanta has turned the Atlanta Beltline Arboretum into a living learning lab, guiding high schoolers through data collection and analysis to quantify the ecosystem services of urban forests. Project ACER (Atlanta Canopy Education & Research) is a community science project for students in the Metro Atlanta area that highlights the importance of our urban trees in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Rethinking "Invasive"- Integrating Just Language in EE 9:00 - 10:55 in Ecology Lab (Annex)

Jonah McDonald, Core Group, Just Language in Ecology Education / Co-presenters **Danielle Bunch, Sam Cramer**

The common language used to teach about invasive species has been called angry, militaristic, subjective, xenophobic, and alienating or triggering for our audience. In response, a national group of educators, artists, and forest restoration practitioners formed Just Language in Ecology Education and have developed a Language Guide to help us be more inclusive, accurate, and welcoming when teaching about organisms brought from other places. Come learn and practice with us!

Storytelling for Ecojustice 1:15 - 2:10 in Classroom 1 (Main)

Maya McKenzie, K-5 Science Teacher, Atlanta Public Schools and PhD Candidate, Georgia State University

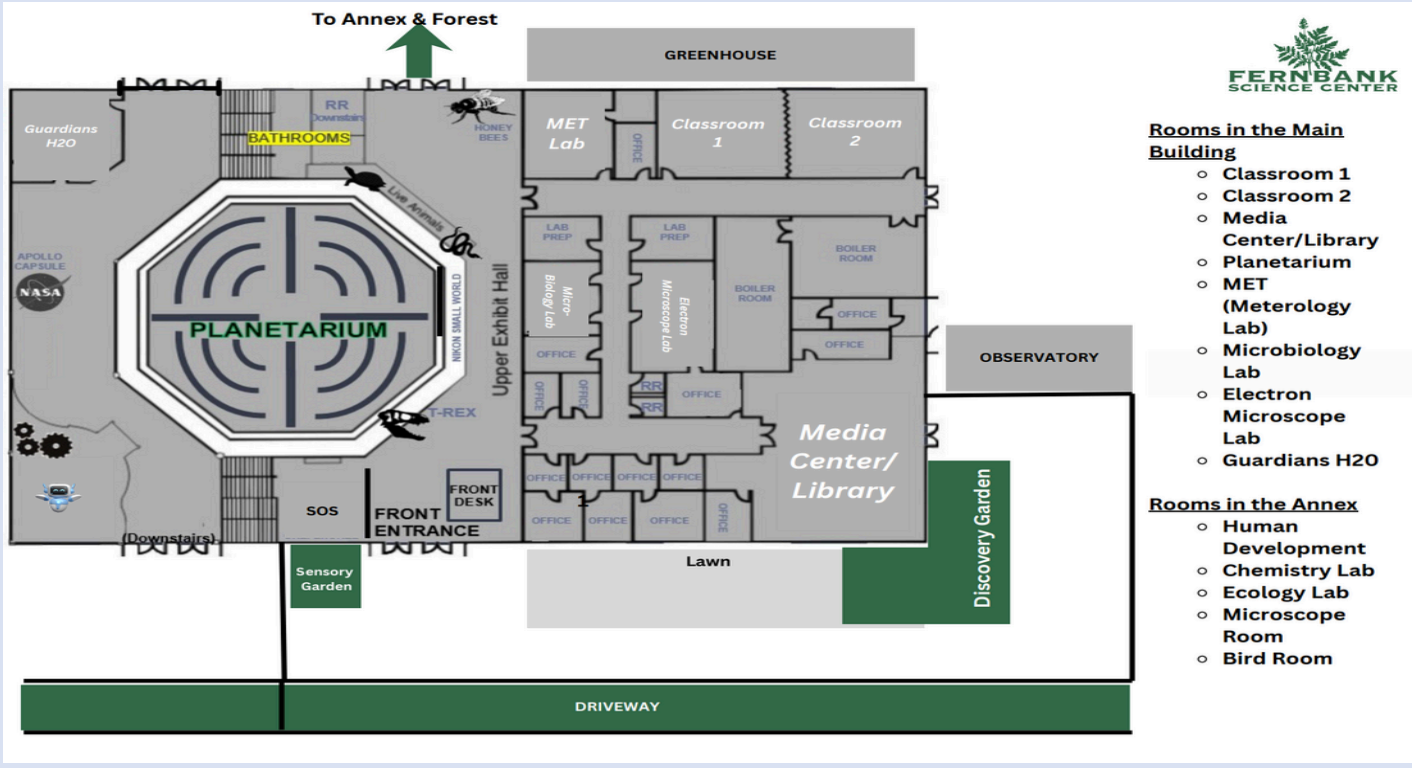
The stories we know and tell shape how we understand and interact with the world. These stories can reinforce bias—or challenge it. This session will explore counter-storytelling as a tool to overcome barriers to outdoor learning and provide strategies and activities to implement storytelling in both formal and informal learning contexts.

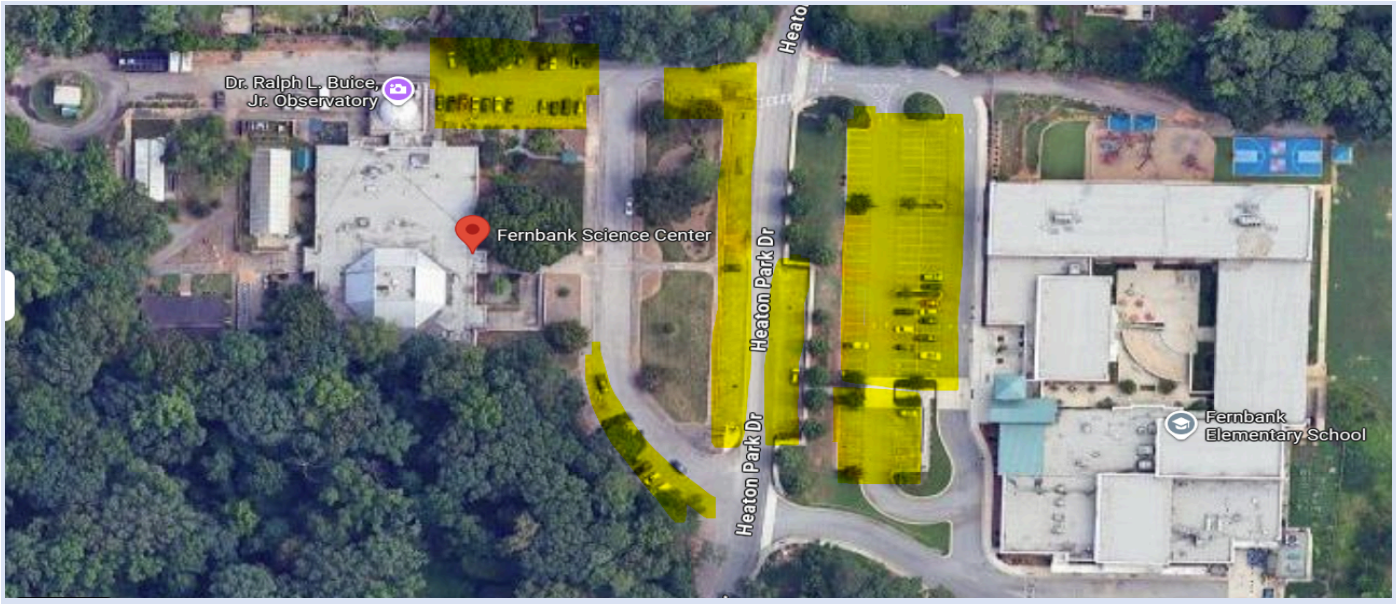
Where the Wild Things Grow: Designing, Growing and Teaching with Carnivorous Plants 2:15 - 3:10

Dan Bulger, Instructional Specialist, Fernbank Science Center, DeKalb County School District in Bird Room (Annex)

Explore how a challenging, flood-prone area at Fernbank Science Center became a thriving carnivorous plant garden and outdoor classroom. Participants will learn how to design and maintain carnivorous gardens while exploring plant habitats, adaptations, nutrient needs, and K–12 science education applications.

Fernbank Science Center Classrooms and Meeting Spaces



Fernbank Science Center Location and Parking

- **Fernbank Science Center: 156 Heaton Park Drive in Atlanta, GA 30307** ***(NOT Fernbank Museum)***.
- Map link: https://maps.app.goo.gl/Eqmm5LQdVAEywgm69
- Parking is available on-site and across the street at Fernbank Elementary. Please park in designated spaces, and not on any roadway or in residential areas. Designated parking spaces (in yellow on map) are located along Heaton Park Drive, in front of the Science Center, and at the Fernbank Elementary School. Parking is free, however vehicles not in designated parking spaces may be ticketed and/or towed.