

**Transcript, Interview with Ray Sander, DBG President on “The Talk of Delmarva” Show – Jake Smith, WGMB-FM (92.7), May 31, 2023**

Jake: Ten years ago, Valery Cordrey and I were talking on the “Potting Shed” radio program about the plan for DBG. No one really knew if it was going to work. A few years went by, and we were concerned that it wasn’t going to happen, but it did happen! Buses are coming. Children are coming - people are learning. It’s an incredible story. DBG was selected as the 2022 Best Attraction in Sussex County by the Southern Delaware Tourism Office.

Ray: That was a great honor. You are a great supporter of the concept because you’re an avid gardener. You know the importance of gardening. You know what it brings to the quality of life here in Delmarva. We want to thank you for that early support, and continued interest. As a gardener, I am giving you a copy of Piet Oudolf’s HUMMELO book today.

Jake: Wow, thank you!

Ray: This is the story of his garden design concept of what to plant where and when.

Jake: That’s always the challenge, isn’t it?

Ray: Piet is a genius! That word is used loosely these days, let me tell you this man is a genius, when it comes to plants and what works together and how to create what looks like a natural garden but, it’s not a natural garden it’s a naturalistic garden. Enjoy it.

Jake: Last time you were here I got a DBG hat, thank you. My wife and I have been lucky to see some beautiful gardens in Europe. Nobody does gardens like the Europeans do – believe me. Thank you so much sir.

Ray: When you talk about European gardens, we have the Gold Standard of American public gardens within reach, up at Longwood Gardens. We are not a Longwood Gardens, we are a coastal plain garden. So, when a tree falls at DBG, as long as it’s not across a path, we leave it because nature takes its course, and the bugs and birds each takes its thing from that fallen tree. That’s how....

Jake: The animals will seek shelter from that fallen tree.

Ray: The whole cycle of horticulture and animals, insects and birds, it’s a great book.

Jake: Thank you for the book. One of the areas that is probably not well known about the DBG- the land that was used for DBG was actually old farmland.

Ray: That’s right. It was 37-acres, and 25 of those acres were pretty flat, and planted in soybeans for many years. The remaining 12-plus acres are wooded. And, in the history of the land, those trees would have been taken down as well, but they are on a slope, that goes from about 16-feet above sea level down to Pepper Creek. It’s a very gentle slope, that was discouraging from a cultivation perspective. We have the trees, and the trees are an amazing asset to the gardens. We have a group of volunteers that are actually doing a tree survey. They are locating each of the trees on a grid within a system.

Jake: That’s interesting, they do that at Longwood and Mt Cuba don’t they?

Ray: Yes! If you are going to be responsible for the land that you are given. Remember this land is still owed by the Sussex County Land Trust, then they rent it to us for one dollar a year for 99-years, renewable two more times. So, the very far-sighted management of the Land Trust allows us to use it. That makes a big difference. We have raised over \$7 million, but many new gardens spend more than that paying for the land. We get it for one dollar a year, the \$7 million we raised we put into the land. We are very fortunate.

Jake: The fact that the land that you are on is considered environmentally sensitive land, what you are doing actually is continuing the natural landscape along Pepper Creek there.

Ray: Absolutely

Jake Did I get the right?

Ray: Land preservation is key. In Sussex County it has been a prime location for development. The neighbors that we have are very happy that they have a botanic garden near their property. We feel a real responsibility, and having a Piet Oudolf Meadow as the crown jewel of our garden, makes it more valuable to us and the community. Many people from all over the world come to Dagsboro because of Piet.

Jake: He actually participated in the garden work.

Ray: He did the design and with pencil – no computers – no AI. He does it himself.

Jake: My great grandfather was a garden designer. He did it by hand. He did it at the White House for a number of years. If you are thinking about visiting the DBG one thing you have to realize is that these are all indigenous plants – native plants. These are what can naturally grow here. These are not – go to a local box store and pickup a package of impatiens. This is what would naturally grow in the area, if the area was left alone.

Ray: 85% of the plants in the meadow are all native, and pollinator friendly. The other 15% are also pollinator friendly. The meadow is the best example of what you can do with native plants. We have a couple of other gardens in that area that we have created – the Rhyne Garden is really a water treatment system at the parking lot. We have the Rhyne there that we have heavily planted ...

Jake: For natural water filtration - right?

Ray: It slows up the water filtration into the aquifer, cleans the water as it goes through all these plants roots, and so it's an amazing example of what can be done around people's homes.

Jake: Absolutely.

Ray: We are now working on a Hedgerow Garden. It will show people how to use natural plants, shrubs and trees as a barrier, so you don't have to build a fence to delineate your property.

Jake: I didn't know what a hedgerow was? Ray when we take a break in a second, I want you to talk about why the average Delawarean should visit the DBG, because there is a feeling of peace, just walking around the gardens. If you are fed-up with everything that's going on in the world and it's getting to you – well walking around may be your answer. We are talking about DBG it's a reality - it's here. It's won all sorts of awards. It was ten-years in the making. It is a permanent part of life here in the First State. We will be back with Ray Sander, President of DBG and yours truly, Jake Smith in just a moment.

(BREAK)

Jake: Back with Ray Sander, President of DBG. Ray, I just want to talk about ... in a very stressful world, in a botanic garden.... After 9-11, I was involved with 9-11 because I had worked in the World Trade Center. It was a terrible time and the best time I spend in that whole crisis, immediately following 9-11 was in my garden. It gave me moments of peace that I didn't have. That's why walking around the garden and where natural creation is actually there to help heal you. I think – people don't realize - that's why walking around a botanic garden, such as DBG, is going to give you the peace that you are looking for. I wonder what you hear from those that visit?

Ray: The serenity of the gardens is overwhelming. It's not just the meadow, which is beautiful, and you are up close with all these native plants and the pollinators, the birds, but then the woods, in some ways are even more peaceful. In the woods you look at the water of Pepper Creek - it's called a creek, but there it is wide and it's tidal, so there is always something happening on it. Birds are on it. It's just beautiful. The woods, the way we have worked out the pathways are very passable. People with all types of mobility capability can enjoy it. It's just a rewarding and renewing experience. It can be stressful running a nonprofit, on a limited budget, but when I go to that garden it's a happy place. It really is. It makes you feel connected with nature, connected with the real world.

Jake: Right. Not the crazy world. I agree. With regard to teaching kids, I always thought from the moment that Valery Cordrey and I heard that DBG was being planned in 2013, first thing we started talking about were the benefits to our children, especially those children that may decide to go into agriculture. We are still an agriculture-state, but I am wondering what your thoughts are, given that you have been around now some 7 or 8-years now?

Ray: Well, we got our first big grant in 2015. We opened our doors in 2019. And now it's 2023, so it's really been only 8-years that I count on the clock. We talked about it 2-years before that, but when we got the grant from the Longwood Foundation - \$750,000 in 2015, that really put us on the map. It is also when we got Piet Oudolf to agree to coming to the meadow. With COVID for the last two years, it really limited the amount of field trips that we were able to get into the gardens. We are working with our colleagues on the Sussex County Land Trust and Sussex County Council, because they are supporting taking the kids around the county - getting them out in the real world. We will be part of that effort. We do things on our own. We do a Butterfly Identification program during the summer. They go crazy because DBG is butterfly heaven.

Jake: What about humming birds?

Ray: Humming birds and bees. It's a real pollinator heaven. Kids come for that, and we have a "Bugs & Bogs, where they take samples from the water in the reconstructed wetlands and see the invertebrates that are in the water. When you only see the water, but when you look at the sample, it's alive with creatures. It's fun to watch kids and see the expression on their face. So, a couple of our programs this summer are for children - go to [delawaregardens.org](http://delawaregardens.org).

We had four days this past week, where we had over 100 guests at the gardens each day. We have been greatly supported by the community. On Mother's Day we had over 1,000 guests. It was a free day, if you brought a food donation for Food Bank of Delaware.

Jake: I wanted to ask you because you got involved with food for the Food Bank, and the Blood Bank as well?

Ray: Not the blood bank, but during COVID we did host the COVID vaccinations. Back to Mother's Day, we collected over a ton of food - 2,300 pounds of food, On Earth Day we had 500 guests and collected 1,300 pounds of food. People recognize the food insecurity that our neighbors here in Delmarva have. It is important for those of us who have the ability to make a food donation to do so. We forgo the entrance fee for those days. Just enjoy the gardens and bring some food for the Food Bank of Delaware. Have a great Mother's Day -1,000 people came out.

Jake: That's amazing. Ray you rely on volunteers obviously?

Ray: We only have five paid employees. And four of those are people working at the gardens.

Jake: Caretakers - right?

Ray: No, they're Horticulturists – they are trained people.

Jake: You don't need Master Gardeners to be volunteers?

Ray: No not at all. We have a corps of about 100 volunteers. Over 7,000 hours donated last year. Without volunteers we would not have the DBG. They are the key to our success.

Jake: So, if someone would like to volunteer at DBG?

Ray: Go to [delawaregardens.org](http://delawaregardens.org). Go on our website there is a volunteer button. Hit the volunteer button, and we would love to see you come out to the gardens. Get to see what you would like to do. It is not just working in the gardens. People are doing stuff in the hoop houses planting seeds and growing plants, so we don't have to rely on the retail market.

Jake: A couple of years ago Nancy and I were driving down Coastal Highway. We were driving in the area known as the Forgotten Mile. There were native Hibiscus growing. I said to her, look at those beautiful plants, what are they? I was looking and they were native Hibiscus. Different, but still beautiful. That is really the point of what DBG is trying to do. You should not lose sight of the fact that natural plants in this area are still beautiful too. What you've done at DBG is bring all of that together, so you can walk and see when God created the earth what it was like in six days and the seventh day he rested.

Ray: The Amsonia, the Batisia, the Echinacea are all now in great bloom. Go on our Instagram or our Facebook page you can see what is in bloom today.

Jake: Excellent.

Jake: Updated on a regular basis?

Ray: Yes. People say we looked on Instagram and we saw the pictures, and we came today because we wanted to see it.

Jake: That's why it's important. Ray Sander Thank you so much for the book.

Ray: [Delwaregardens.org](http://Delwaregardens.org) is the place to keep in touch with us.

Jake: Keep in touch with DBG and visit. Get away from all this craziness. Back to what God created for us.

Ray: Amen.