

Raul Mogená

FIQWS 10108

Leslie Carpenter

09/19/2025

Garden Of Wonder

I didn't care much about nature in middle school, except for field trips, which meant getting out of class. So when my school planned a visit to the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, I signed up without thinking too much about it. On the bus I felt only a little excitement. When we arrived I saw one of my favorite teachers, Ms. Ayala, waiting at the entrance. She always smiled so you felt seen; she taught with kindness and somehow made learning feel easy. I wanted to be in her group.

The moment we stepped into the garden everything changed. The air felt cleaner and cooler. Sunlight warmed my face. Flowers exploded with color, and winding paths opened to small surprises, a pond here, a patch of butterflies there. Walking with Ms. Ayala, I began to notice things I had never paid attention to: the soft music of birds, the tiny patterns on leaves, insects working in the soil. Ms. Ayala did more than name plants, she told stories about how they live and survive. Her stories turned facts into curiosity.

The most surprising plant was the titan arum, the "corpse flower." It was enormous and bloomed only rarely, for a short time. When it opens it smells terrible, Ms. Ayala explained that the smell tricks flies and beetles into pollinating it. Standing near that huge flower, I felt both interested and a little afraid. I learned something important that day: nature can be strange and smelly and still be beautiful and smart. Even what seems ugly has a role in helping the ecosystem survive.

That visit changed how I saw the world. Before the trip, trees and plants were just background; at the garden I began to see how each plant plays a part in a larger system. Ms. Ayala's stories helped me understand facts, but it was the feeling of being in a living place that made me care most. After the trip I started to notice nature almost every day, how light brightens a flower, how insects cooperate, where our air and food come from. I didn't become an expert overnight, but I felt a new responsibility: if nature gives us what we need to survive, we should protect it. Learning ecoliteracy, I realized, means paying attention to relationships in nature and thinking about the consequences of our actions. Now I try small changes—wasting less, caring for green spaces, and imagining how people and nature can thrive together. Ms. Ayala showed me how curiosity can grow into care. Years later I still remember the quiet of the garden, the sun on my face, and the stories of each plant. That day didn't just create interest, it gave me a reason to protect the world around me.