

Leadership and Gardens

by Kimberlee Hendricks

A few weeks ago, on a cold Chicago evening in January, my niece arrived at our front door as she often does, semi-unannounced, but radiating a joyful presence that causes you to forget the shoes cluttering the foyer and the toddler toys every three to four feet.

She arrived as usual with a gift in hand, a testament to her generous personality and old soul. With a quick hug, she placed a flower pot filled with beautiful yellow tulips in my hands, along with a card, and said, “Read this later, Aunty Kim.”



Kimberlee Hendricks is the managing director of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. With over 21 years of experience as a former owner and operator of a child care center in Chicago's South Loop community, Hendricks brings a wealth of passion and real world experience to her role. Previously, she served as a faculty member and early childhood department chair at National Louis University, where she developed and led courses for future educators.

She has served in the corporate education and publishing space and has presented early childhood business and professional workshops both locally and nationally. She holds a Master of Arts in Early Childhood Education, Curriculum, and Instruction from Howard University and is pursuing a Doctorate in Curriculum, Advocacy, and Policy at National Louis University.

Her work has been featured in *Crain's Chicago Business*, *Black Enterprise Magazine*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *Ebony Magazine*. Kimberlee has also appeared on NBC and WCIU as an early childhood thought leader. As a member of the City of Chicago's Minimum Wage Increase Task Force, she has advocated for wage equity across sectors, but most notably on behalf of the early childhood profession. A graduate of the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses Program, Hendricks has collaborated with child care business and development organizations nationwide. She is a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and serves on the Commission on Professional Excellence in Early Childhood Education.

Hours later when the kids were tucked away, I picked up the bright sky-blue envelope. Inside, I found a beautifully hand-written message along with a lesson about tulips. The line that stood out most to me was that *tulips grow best in winter*. As a self-proclaimed “nature girl,” this line set me on a quest to more deeply explore gardening, an activity that I have always found fascinating. As a former kindergarten teacher, Froebel-influenced educator, and advocate for the “children’s garden,” this deeply resonated with me and so the journey began.

The idea of a tulip, something so delicate, growing in winter stuck with me and reminded me how many beautiful things in the world are born and nurtured in dark, cold conditions—circumstances that, to the naked eye, might be perceived as hopeless. Yet beautiful things can emerge out of the soil of life, and while tulips typically flourish and bloom in spring, the most critical growth happens in winter.

Chicago’s dark, cold winters and blustery winds off Lake Michigan can overshadow memories of flowers in bloom, but gardening, as I have learned, is much more about the process than the product, a relatable concept for early educators. At its core, the gardening process includes *cultivating, planting, nurturing, and harvesting*. My exploration into gardening became a reflective metaphor for the state of our “world garden” today and the transitions that I believe are calling our true values and beliefs to the surface.

Amid this exploration, I found myself reflecting deeply on how the principles of gardening could be applied to the current challenges impacting our profession.



During these times of challenge and change, it might seem trite to talk about gardens and flowers, but I challenge each of you to simply use the gardening metaphor as a landscape for our collective work as early childhood professionals and institutional leaders.

The principles of gardening are like many things, an “art,” but gardening is also a science. It is easy to focus on the beautiful blooms and foliage that appear above ground, but what lies beneath the surface is what matters.

The scientific element of gardening is about planning and cultivating the deep dark soil where the seeds will be planted. Make no mistake, a wise gardener knows that gardens are full of surprises and that not every seed will thrive or survive, but there are lessons to be learned in both successes and failures in gardening.

Our theme for the Leadership Connections 2025 conference is “Leadership in Bloom.” While the theme is a nod to our past and the visionary leadership of our founder, Dr. Paula Jorde Bloom, it is also an aspirational look toward the future and what it can be. It is also an acknowledgment of the seasons and circles of life.

Audrey Hepburn said, “To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow.” As leaders in communities and institutions of higher education and early learning, I challenge you to consider what you want to cultivate as you mentor future leaders, nurture learning communities, strategically advocate, and honor every voice within reach of our care.

I also challenge you to examine your soil. Check the condition, provide extra nutrients if necessary, and be willing to break up the fallow ground. Once the soil is ready, consider intentionally planting seeds of hope, knowledge, collaboration, and kindness.

Remember, not all plants need the same thing, so be mindful of what’s in your garden and be careful not to give too much or too little water or sunlight.

I believe it is important to be generationally minded and think about those who will follow us and that is why I am so inspired by the African proverb that says, “We must be willing to plant gardens from which we may never eat.” Even the possibility that someone might be encouraged or empowered because of my contributions makes it worth the effort and sacrifice.

As I close, I want to share this inspiring quote from Dr. Maya Angelou, “As I gaze at my garden and regard the varying colors the Creator has made for us, red, yellow, blue, white, pink, purple, etc..., I also think of the many colors the Creator has made of us, black, beige, brown, red, yellow and white—and all of us are beautiful.”

By the time this article is published, it will be Spring and I hope that like the tulips, we have grown through winter and that we all recognize the beauty in the garden.