THE GRANDEST GARDEN

BEYOND ITS PROVINCE AS A BEAUTIFUL RETREAT, THE US BOTANIC GARDEN IS TAKING THE LEAD IN PRESERVATION EFFORTS BY CULTIVATING RARE, ENDANGERED, AND HEIRLOOM PLANTS. **BY LESLIE QUANDER WOOLDRIDGE**

Garden Court, at the US Botanic Garden's Conservatory. INSET: A family visiting one of the hothouses, 1945.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG POWERS (CONSERVATORY OPENER); GETTY IMAGES (1945 HOTHOUSE)

LEFT: The rose garden is culled from the institution's dozens of species. INSET: Bartholdi Fountain, designed by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, circa 1945.

An expanse of flora unfolds before me—emerald leaves, verdant moss, and twisted vines—becoming visible through a sheer mist. Inside the glass conservatory the air hangs pleasantly, warm and slightly humid, though the weather outside bounces between biting winds and early-spring sunshine. Here, tropical trees stretch overhead, climbing more than 90 feet skyward, and sheltering leafy plants clustered on the ground. Steps away, a stream of water moves languidly through the space, terminating in a still pool, and a few small blossoms peek out from the dense foliage. Pieces of this surreal scene seem pulled from classic novels—part *Jungle Book* exoticism with a twist of mystery à la *The Secret Garden*; yet this space, this experience, is entirely Washingtonian.

About 1.2 million visitors—locals and tourists—stroll through DC's US Botanic Garden each year. The national plant museum was established by Congress in 1820 and has been administered by the Architect of the Capitol since 1934. A Washington institution, the USBG lays claim to a variety of well-tended spaces, and one of them is the sprawling Conservatory, on the National Mall, which is currently celebrating its 80th anniversary.

But the District's most famous and historic garden offers more than stunning beauty to curious out-of-towners and local visitors. The institution also protects its treasured inhabitants through conservation and education programs.

"Plant biodiversity is being lost at a startling rate," explains USBG Executive Director Holly Shimizu. "Caring for these plants in institutions such as botanical gardens is one way we can make sure these treasures are available to future generations."

In addition to the institution's three-acre outdoor National Garden, known for its fragrant rose collection and native mid-Atlantic plants, and the artsy, two-acre Bartholdi Park, which is home to a variety of species, the Botanic Garden operates an 85,000-square-foot production facility in Anacostia (usually not open to the public) that provides shelter and sustenance to thousands of plants—including those that are rare and endangered.

Unlike the displays at many of the city's noted museums, the USBG's exhibitions are, literally and figuratively, alive. The plants selected for public viewing are exceptionally beautiful—delicate, wispy ferns; showy white and purple orchids; even a cacao tree, solid and heavy with orange pods. "No where else feels like [the Conservatory]," says Bill McLaughlin, the USBG's curator of plants. "You immediately exhale when you walk through the door." The eye-catching glass and aluminum structure spans 28,944 square feet of growing space and holds two courtyard gardens and 10 distinct garden rooms, where the

LEFT: The fountain today, amid verdant foliage at the two-acre Bartholdi Park.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GETTY IMAGES (1945 FOUNTAIN); GREG POWERS (ORCHID)

The genus *Cymbidium* comprises some 52 species of orchid found in Southeast Asia, the Malay Archipelago, and northern Australia.

"Caring for these plants is one way we can make sure these treasures are available to future generations."
—*HOLLY SHIMIZU*

Bill McLaughlin. US Botanic Garden curator of plants.

The orange pods of the cacao tree *(Theobroma cacao)* are the source of chocolate.

Gardener Adam Pyle tends to one of his charges.

The US Botanic Garden has 1,797 different types of orchids in its custody, including this hybrid lady slipper orchid.

The golden barrel cactus (*Echinocactus grusonii*) is at an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild.

FROM LEFT: A rare olulu *(Brighomia insignis)*, commonly known as cabbage on a stick, is native to Hawaii; former President Bill Clinton during a visit to USBG in 1993.

feeling of serenity is especially present. Here, the buoyant air is always just right for each species, and the noise level is typically low. Even when thunder clouds sweep the skies beyond the glass walls or when people descend on the Mall for picnics and soccer games, the foliage emanates an inherent calm.

SPECIAL PLANTS, SPECIAL PLACE

The doors of the Conservatory's entrance lead to the Garden Court, blooming with bright pink Egyptian star clusters *(Pentas lanceolata)*, but it's also home to commercial plants such as corn and tea, as well as to leafy trees. The verdant Jungle room is just past the Court. And beyond that is the World Deserts room, a carefully climate-controlled space where the endangered golden barrel cactus thrives, and the Medicinal Plants room, which includes a quinine tree, typically cultivated for its malaria-treating bark.

Each area in the Conservatory represents different climates and collections, and "that's why these plants all grow so well together," McLaughlin says while meandering through the warm Jungle room. "It's really a complete education in here," he adds, "but if you wanted to walk by and just enjoy the beauty, you can do that. People really spend a lot of time in here because of the ambience."

The institution traces its roots to George Washington, who, in a 1796 letter, asked city commissioners to add a "botanical garden" to the District's plans. In 1816, a Washington society called the Columbian Institute for the Promotion of the Arts and Sciences also proposed its creation, and, four years later, Congress went on to establish the institution west of the Capitol grounds.

> "We are both the oldest public botanical garden in the United States and the most visited."
>
> —HOLLY SHIMIZU

The United States Exploring Expedition (also known as the "Wilkes Expedition") began in 1838, and returned in 1842 with a collection of living plants from around the world. These overseas gems were relocated from an existing greenhouse to the institution's original conservatory in 1850, and then to the current conservatory, which was completed in 1933.

"There are many wonderful institutions throughout the country that steward wonderful collections of plants for public display. However, we are the only such botanical garden in the Washington, DC, region," says Shimizu, noting that the American Association of Museums (now the American Alliance of Museums) accredited the institution in 2007. "[Today] we are both the oldest public botanical garden in the United States and the most visited."

That means the institution has a great responsibility to educate guests and preserve its history. In addition to caring for new additions, the work includes watching over older plants, such as the three surviving original plants from the Wilkes Expedition, as well as their many descendants.

CAREFUL CONSERVATION

Mornings at the Garden require intense activity. Beginning early each day, expert gardeners prune specimens, water their charges, and swap out plants for display to prepare for opening at 10 AM. Aside from the production facility, the institution is open to the public, free of charge, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

"We're here to demonstrate a whole interesting range of things about plants, including their ecological and aesthetic properties," explains Dr. Ari Novy, the institution's public programs manager, during a recent walk through the various rooms of the Conservatory.

About three in 10 plant species are threatened in the United States alone. Recognizing the importance of plant conservation, the USBG operates its Plant Rescue Center in accordance with the US Plant Rescue Center Program, a national initiative that maintains plants confiscated by border authorities as part of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) program. "We are a certified repository in the CITES system. Once we accept those plants, we have to care for them forever," Novy says. "It's very important to protect these species that, in many cases, are extinct in the wild." In fact, the Garden has already accepted hundreds of protected and threatened plants, mostly orchids and cacti, as part of this agreement.

Many plants live on, but some do not. "Plants are organisms just like you and me. We know when a plant is diseased, when it becomes unstable," Novy says. "Every plant has a life span." Garden staff propagate dying plants when possible (using parts of the plants to create new ones), and they duplicate rare collections, engaging in plant exchanges with other botanic gardens. Round-the-clock computer monitoring in the Conservatory ensures appropriate environmental conditions for all of the plants, with 24-hour human monitoring added during the winter months. "It's a very sophisticated system," Novy adds.

Eco-minded activities also extend to the institution's outdoor spaces, where chemical pesticides are avoided in favor of natural controls, such as beneficial insects, and regionally native species flourish. "You won't find English ivy [an invasive plant] grown in many of our beds," McLaughlin explains, adding that the outdoor rose garden, which is culled from dozens of the institution's varieties, features roses that are typically naturally resistant to diseases. "It's truly one of the most environmentally friendly rose gardens," he says. "You can stick your nose in and be pretty confident. At most, you'll see a ladybug."

Such native planting practices and conservation steps are easy enough for visitors to adopt for their own personal spaces at home. "They can look at this garden and see [the best places] to put plants in their own gardens," McLaughlin says, strolling around the grounds once again. "We hope that those people, even if they come to [the Garden for its] atmosphere, will leave with a lot more." **CF**

OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREG POWERS (MCLAUGHLIN, CACAO, PYLE, ORCHID); GETTY IMAGES (CACTUS). THIS PAGE: GREG POWERS (OLULU); GETTY IMAGES (CLINTON)