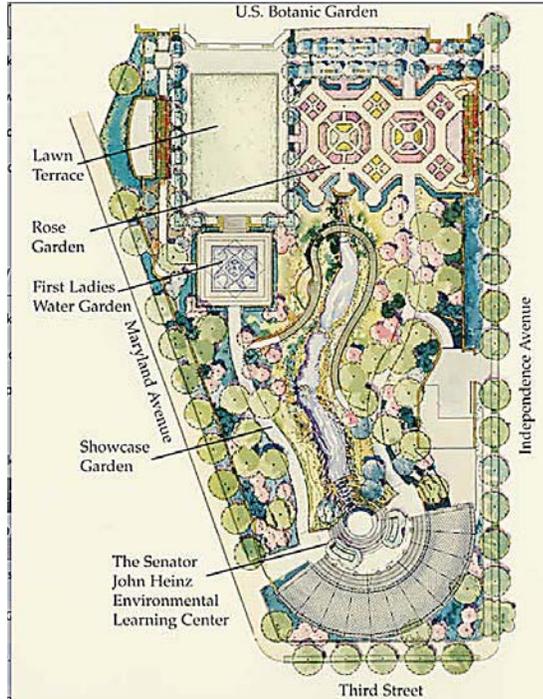


## Our Nation's Greenhouse: The Mall, Washington, D.C.

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by Sandy Welches'05



There is a glass-domed building on the Mall alongside the Smithsonian that contains nearly 10,000 living inhabitants, some of them over 165 years old. It sits at the foot of the Capitol Building, rising a sparkling eighty feet and is called the U.S. Botanic Garden. Many of the Garden's earliest specimens have survived since they arrived in 1824. They were the spoils of the Wilkes Expedition, a four-year 87,000 mile voyage that circumnavigated the globe and confirmed Antarctica was a continent. \*

The Garden contains a male and female Sago Palm, metroxlon sagu and a Ferocious Cyad, a spiny, Mesozoic-period, palm-like shrub with sharp, fang-like fronds, both collected on that voyage. In 1820, President James Monroe set aside five acres for a national greenhouse. One of the earliest crusaders for a plant repository, a Navy surgeon improbably named Dr. Edward Cutbush, saw the necessity for a botanical garden "where various seeds and plants could be cultivated, and, as they multiplied, distributed to other parts of the Union". Maybe that's where community gardening got its start.

### Botanic Garden Highlights

To keep these 10,000 plants alive and the facility open 365 days a year, it has a full-time staff of 66. It hosts daily plant and flower shows and in the warm seasons you can

enjoy 250 types of Roses and learn from an annual show featuring sustainability

The Garden has several outdoor courtyards and ten greenhouses that simulate the world's key climate zones. The World Desert House plants range from myriad cacti to a Mexican Bear Tree, which has thin leaves emerging from a huge trunk. Pretty strange. The Medicinal Plants House is a cornucopia of herbs, flowers, and ferns used to treat many human diseases and conditions. There's even a plant to control dandruff. From Madagascar, a flowering periwinkle is used to treat childhood leukemia and Hodgkin's lymphoma. And, of course, the echinacea 'Purple Coneflower' gets a nod for fighting colds.

The Orchid House is like a trip to a tropical paradise, with 200 specimens, many in bloom at the same time. It has an orchid with a putrid stench that attracts pollinators to a plant that lives for centuries. Among the ten greenhouses, I have two favorites—the Rare and Endangered Species and the Forest Primeval.

The Forest Primeval exhibits primitive ferns and vegetation. A crown jewel of this collection is the *wollemia nobillis*, or 'Wollemi Pine' from the 200 million-year-old family Araucariaceae—one of the oldest and rarest plants on earth. Its relatives include the Norfolk Island and the Monkey Puzzle pines. Discovered in 1994 in an Australian rain forest, it was previously thought to be extinct. Trials in Japan and the US indicate that it is hardy in our USDA Zones 7-11. In order to successfully reintroduce it, the Wollemi will be available in US garden centers in summer 2008. Less than 100 adult trees exist in the wild, but that is about to change. Pretty exciting to take something off of the list, don't you think? The Botanical



Garden sits next to the Capitol Building vs. the monuments

Despite all the technological advances, most of the specimens are watered by hand. I'll bet that's not a surprise to any of you, though. According to Holly Shimizu, the Botanical Garden's executive director, "we do this because it's both an art and a science to know and understand exactly what each species needs". Some things just don't change.

\*Many of the facts above were kindly provided by U.S. Botanic Garden docents.

