

The Evolving Role of Botanical Gardens

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Hedges against extinction, showcases for botany?

Botanical gardens, those islands of serenity amid society's increasing din, were defined early on as places "open to the public and in which the plants are labeled." Today, the purpose of these gardens has greatly expanded to include rescuing plant biodiversity, offering serious programs of research and education to citizens of all ages and instruction for skilled botanists, creating aesthetically pleasing refuges from modern life, and maintaining storage centers both on-site and off-site for the long-term preservation of plant species against the time when they will have vanished from their usual habitats. Even though the role of botanical gardens has expanded, they are faced with constant funding pressures.

From their early days (which go back many centuries), botanical gardens have existed to acquaint humans with the natural world around them. The first such places were physic gardens in which the importance of medicinal plants was recognized. Later, as the age of discovery brought seeds and fruits from distant lands, botanical gardens became vital components of trade. They have always been appreciated for the beauty they harbor. With such a history, then, it was little wonder that when the world's most famous present-day garden, the Royal Botanic

Gardens at Kew, in London, blossomed into greatness, it was in part because of the desire of the Third Earl of Bute to produce for royalty a place that, as Kew's historians put it, would "contain all the plants known on Earth." Botanical gardens have tried to meet that ambitious goal since the mid-eighteenth century.

Inevitably, because the gardens must be fertilized with money from their visitors, they are also places of entertainment, whether that means toy

railroads or June weddings or music by Blondie and the Magnets (who appeared at Kew in 2011). Botanical gardens' schedule of events rarely fails to include annual occasions (Halloween is a big one) and events of home-grown interest, such as quilt shows and local ethnic festivals. Many dot their landscapes with statuary for their customers to admire.

The need to bring paying crowds through the turnstiles is a universal



The Palm House at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, in London. Photo credit: Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.