

# Reorganizing plant collections

The living plant collections at the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum offer a unique educational asset to the community. Currently, the bulk of the collections is organized on the basis of broad geographic affinities. Plants from five regions of the world are assembled in discrete collections: Australia, South Africa, eastern Asia and eastern North America (whose similar plants are remnants of a single ancient flora that once dominated the northern hemisphere), the Mediterranean region, and southwestern North America.

The composition of each collection is based on a number of factors, including ease and frequency of cultivation in Southern California, prominence in a region's native flora, ornamental characteristics, and, of course, availability.

Continued development and adherence to the designated theme of the geographic theme is critical to maintaining the Arboretum's unique contribution to the region's botanic garden community. Now

that the Arboretum has accomplished its initial goal of acquiring and displaying a wider variety of exotic plants for Southern California through these collections, a potential future consideration will be the refinement and reorganization of these collections in a manner that enhances their display and educational values.

## FUTURE RENOVATIONS

The main emphasis of this reorganization is to improve the quality and continuity of horticultural displays and interpretation, using a thematic approach that is repeated throughout the collections. A reorganization that would make it easier to develop a stronger horticultural interpretation can be logically based on an articulation of the vastly different habitat and vegetation types that exist within the broad regions represented by each collection.

This can be accomplished by grouping plants with their natural associates whose common hereditary adaptations to the same habitat (climate, rainfall patterns, soils, etc.) translate into similar cultural requirements in the garden.

Until now, there has been no clear organizational scheme for how the plants are grouped or displayed within each regional collection. This is often the case in the early stages of an arboretum's development, when the emphasis is on the acquisition of a diverse array of plants, filling in an initially austere landscape with whatever is most expedient.

In the Australian plant collection, for example, plants from the wet temperate forest, the dry temperate forest, the moist subtropical forest, and the semi-desert outback are all mixed together in a random fashion. A similar mix occurs in the African plant collection, where African plants from the winter rainfall areas of the Cape, the moist subtropical eastern coastal forests which receive rain in the



*Although all are from Australia, the grass-tree (*Xanthorrhoea quadrangulata*) in the background, the bull mallee tree (*Eucalyptus behriana*) and the flax lily (*Dianella* sp.) occupy disparate plant communities in their homeland.*



# *could enhance educational value*

summer, the inland grasslands, and the semi-desert of the west are also randomly planted among one another.

Both of these collections have achieved a commendable level of general diversity, and are often aesthetically appealing. However, they have yet to fulfill their educational potential. By renovating the collections in a way that illustrates the unifying principles of horticulture and plant biology, the educational value of the collections as living classrooms would be greatly enhanced.

## **IMPROVED INTERPRETATION**

The development of interpretive materials and programs must be a part of the renovation planning process from the beginning. Well designed maps, for which there are corresponding landmarks which are easily located throughout the grounds, should be made available. Visitors who come to the Arboretum with a specific interest, as well as the uninitiated walk-in, need better direction than the current map provides.

In addition to maps, self-guided tour pamphlets should be developed to direct visitors through specific points of interest. For example, "Outstanding Plants for the Small Landscape" is a popular area of interest in which an interpretive pamphlet could give valuable information in addition to directing interested visitors to appropriate specimens in the garden. The pamphlet should be developed in concert with a system of pathways which take visitors through the collections, with aspects that optimize the many beautiful vistas inherent to the garden, as well as providing the best view of individual plantings.

For each regional collection, central interpretive areas should be installed to explain to the public the different vegetation types within the region, elaborating on the influence of climate, moisture, and soils. These interpretive centers should be landscaped to

highlight that region's plants which are prominent in Southern California horticulture.

Another potential area of interest that should be a part of the planned collection renovation is a display of economically important plants from each of the geographic regions, with well documented interpretation regarding how they have impacted civilization, agriculture, and commerce throughout their history. In the case of economically important plants that aren't appropriate for display, information should nevertheless be included in the interpretation of the vegetation type in which they originated.

In addition, the collection-specific interpretive materials can discuss how people have historically adapted to living in the different vegetation zones of each region, and develop lessons which compare distant, but similar regions around the world. In this way, the collections can become a considerable educational asset to the community.

Repeating this framework throughout the collections would enable teachers to use the educational theme when they visit with their classes. Interpretive materials, when distributed to the schools, could preview the educational components of the collections for teachers, encouraging them to structure their presentation along the repetitive themes of habitat factors that occur in each of the collections.

These are some of the ways in which the Arboretum hopes to enlarge its service to the community in the coming years.

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