



Director Francis Ching Retires

Francis Ching, Director of the Los Angeles County Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens for the past 20 years, announced his retirement effective March 31. A native of Hawaii, Mr. Ching joined the Department in 1956 after earning degrees from Michigan State University.

As Director of the Department, Mr. Ching has overseen operation of the four botanical gardens run by Los Angeles County: the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum in Arcadia, Descanso Gardens in La Canada Flintridge, South Coast Botanic Gardens on the Palos Verdes Peninsula and the Virginia Robinson Gardens in Beverly Hills.

In recognition of Mr. Ching's achievements, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors appointed him Director Emeritus. During the next eighteen months he will serve as consultant to the gardens, assisting in the completion of specific projects begun during his tenure. Assistant Director, Leon Arnold, will serve as Acting Director until a new Director is appointed by the Board of Supervisors.

CALIFORNIA ARBORETUM FOUNDATION

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President's Message A Critical Time for the Arboretum

Not long after Francis Ching's unexpected announcement of early retirement, articles appeared in the Calendar Section of the Los Angeles Times revealing that county officials are considering a merger of the Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens with the county Natural History Museum. The merger will also include the museum affiliated but homeless Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, a collection of bird eggs, nests and skins collected and organized by Ed. N. Harrison, the long-time President of the supervisor-appointed NHM Board of Governors. Mr. Harrison and Dr. Craig Black, Director of the Natural History Museum, have, for several years, been searching for county land on which to build a WFVZ facility of 45,000 square feet (a building of that size would cover about an acre of ground). Having failed in attempts to place the facility in several other locations, their latest target is a plot near the lake at Descanso Gardens - an area envisioned as an enlarged wild bird refuge on Descanso's master plan. Over a year ago the NHM had requested 4500 square feet of laboratory space at the Arboretum so they could move their staff and herbarium here. Since LASCA'S research building contains only 2500 square feet and is fully occupied by Arboretum staff, Director Ching turned down the request. Now when Director Ching opposed the use of Descanso's land for the Western Foundation's building, county officials apparently asked for his resignation so that they might carry out their plans without opposition.

Alerted by *The Times* reporter to the possible takeover of the county gardens by the NHM, representatives of the Arboreta and Botanic Gardens Board of Governors and the supporting groups for the four county gardens united to oppose any such takeover. They proposed the following recommendations to the Board of Supervisors and the Chief Administrative Officer of Los Angeles County:

- 1) That the Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens remain separate.
- 2) A nationwide search for a new Director start immediately.
- 3) That representatives of the support groups at the four gardens be involved in the process of selecting a new Director.
- 4) That Francis Ching be recalled as Director until the new Director has started to work.
- 5) That no changes be made until the public has had a chance to express its support.

A steering committee, composed of one delegate from the Board of Governors and from each supporting group, has been formed with Richard Grant, First Vice President of the CAF, serving as chairman. At the April 17 meeting of the Board of Supervisors, a motion was passed to request the supervisor-appointed Citizens Economy and Efficiency Commission to review and report back within 30 days on consolidating the Departments of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens and the Museum of Natural History or any other appropriate consolidation.

Under Mr. Ching's guidance, programs at the gardens have expanded beyond the original scope of conserving, studying and displaying plants from around the world with an emphasis on those adaptable to the Southern California environment. He implemented numerous people-related programs and activities that enabled more people to share and enjoy the full value of plant life in Southern California.

Success of these programs has earned Mr. Ching international recognition in his field. Last year he received the prestigious Arthur Hoyt Scott Garden and Horticulture Award from Pennsylvania's Swarthmore College. Mr. Ching is the first Californian to be so honored during the 60 year history of the award.

From 1974-84, Mr. Ching served on the Board of Directors of the American Association of Botanic Gardens and Arboreta, and as its President from 1980-82. In 1986 the AABGA named him an Honorary Life Member, the organization's highest honor.

Mr. Ching has served on the Visiting Committee of Longwood Gardens and the National Arboretum Advisory Council in Washington, D.C. He also served on the board of directors of the American Horticultural Society and the Botanical Collections Committee of the Zoological Society of San Diego. A reviewer and panelist for *Sunset* magazine for over 25 years, he also served as a reviewer for the Institute of Museum Services and for the Museum Assessment Program and Accreditation programs for the American Association of Museums.

On the popular front, Mr. Ching has judged floats for the Tournament of Roses, towering floral headdresses at the Las Floristas Ball and the Easter Parade at Disneyland.



Francis Ching

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Of utmost importance immediately is for all our members and friends to write the county supervisors, or write to your supervisor and send copies to the others plus a copy to the CAO, opposing any takeover, merger or consolidation of the Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens by/ with any other county department.

The Chief Administrative Officer is Richard Dixon.

The supervisors are:
Supervisor Peter Schabarum,
First District
Supervisor Kenneth Hahn,
Second District
Supervisor Edmond Edelman,
Third District
Supervisor Deane Dana,
Fourth District
Supervisor Mike Antonovich,
Fifth District

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I cannot emphasize enough how **important your letter** is recommending that our Department remain independent, that a search for a new Director begin immediately and that Francis Ching be recalled until the new Director has reported for work.

The Natural History Museum collections and research deal with the past while the county gardens are working to improve the environment for today and future generations. Our collections are displayed on our grounds - a laboratory of living plants. Dr. Samuel Ayres, Jr. founded the Arboretum to bring more color to the landscape. Many of the seeds that have been planted are now reaching maturity - after 40 years. Some of the Arboretum's most spectacular additions to our environment can now be seen along the freeways, in parks and home landscapes - the hibiscus-like flowering floss silk trees, pink, gold and white trumpet trees blooming in February and March, the freeway daisy, the blue hibiscus. The collections of endangered orchids and cycads are world-renowned. Public service programs for county residents are too numerous to list here. Did you know that our herbarium curator has solved murders by identifying plant material found on clothes or in a car? And saved lives by identifying poison plants and their antidotes?

Please help save the independence of the Arboretum, Descanso Gardens, South Coast Botanic Gardens and Virginia Robinson Gardens - the four botanical research facilities that compose the Los Angeles County Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens. Write, call, protest any consolidation. Please do it today.

Alice Frost Thomas, President

**Alice Thomas
Receives Volunteer Award**

Alice Frost Thomas, president of the California Arboretum Foundation, was named a Los Angeles County Volunteer of the Year for the Department of Arboreta and Botanic Gardens and a Volunteer in Public Service for Los Angeles County, by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. Mrs. Thomas has given 23 years of volunteer service to the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum. She has worked diligently to match the Foundation's fund raising capabilities with the Arboretum's needs. Her style of leadership has produced a very successful team effort to support the Arboretum.



Ching, Francis. 1988. "President's message: a critical time for the Arboretum." *News* 1990:spring-summer, 1-2.

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