

# THE MISSOURI BOTANICAL GARDEN BEYOND EXCEPTIONAL



To anyone who works in a botanical garden there are a handful of institutions that clearly rank at the very top. If it were cars, we're talking Maserati, Rolls Royce or Ferrari. Like the car, the gardens combine many aesthetic and performance qualities that are renowned industry wide. In the case of gardens this normally includes exceptional horticulture programs on a historic site and a major research department with global influence. In addition, these gardens have extensive education programs that reach

everyone from kindergarteners to advanced graduate students. Generally three gardens come to mind: The New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew north of London and The Missouri Botanical Garden. Many people are surprised that St. Louis, home of baseball's storied Cardinals, historic breweries and the iconic Arch also has a public garden of such renown. The convergence of several distinctive figures over 150 years made it possible, perhaps none more than Dr. Peter Raven, Director Emeritus.



Raven began a long scientific and publishing career in his teens. The consummate taxonomic botanist who studied the evolution and classification of plants Raven was also something else; a remarkable fund raiser and businessman who combined horticulture, botany and history as a vehicle for conserving biodiversity around the world. News Week magazine recognized him as a Hero for the Planet and he received the U.S. National Medal of Science in 2000, one among many international honors. In 2003 the founder of Enterprise rental cars gave the garden 35 million dollars, believed to be the largest single gift to a public garden ever.

In 1971 Raven arrived at Missouri and began to build on a distinguished garden history, ultimately leaving it one of the world's greatest gardens in 2011.

Founded in 1859 the Missouri Botanical Garden served as the estate of Henry Shaw, a lifelong bachelor and business man who profited handsomely from the westward expansion of American settlers. Shaw bought the property in the westerly reaches of St. Louis and began adding trees to the partially wooded

site. Now the garden is surrounded by vibrant mix of city neighborhoods of combined residential and commercial dwellings. In fact, the garden is such a regional and national tourist attraction its increased



local economic activity. Today, Shaw's home remains as a beautifully curated museum, including many of his original furnishings. One aspect of the museum that deserves particular praise is the careful and transparent interpretation of eleven slaves who worked on the property.

Passing through the Visitor Center one is immediately immersed in some of the finest ornamental horticulture anywhere. On the right an expansive Rhododendron collection invites walkers into a maze of spring color. On the left the Linnean House provides a hint of the properties remarkable history. Long and narrow the Linnean House is a classic Orangery featuring hundreds of potted plants. The brick building is named for Carol Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist and creator of the "binomial" classification system for living things. The plants inside are arranged into fascinating family groupings. Just east of the Linnean House the Rose Garden sweeps in a grand arch with one of many fountains in the distance.

Specimen trees have a big impact on the gardens emotive grandeur. Throughout the gardens massive trees shade intimate lawns and shrub collections. Among these giants are many North American natives. Southern red oak, white oak and swamp oaks tower high above the busy pedestrian traffic. Near the gardens Museum Building the National Champion white basswood beckons skyward creating a vast canopy of distinct cordiform or heart shaped leaves. This national designation confirms it's the largest

known tree of its type in the United States. Many temperate trees from Asia and Europe add to these big trees. Chinese elms, Mongolian oaks, giant Himalayan dogwood, Persian perrotia and European beech are just a few. For Virginia natives used to our beautiful small dogwoods, the giant Himalayan dogwood is simply stupendous. Many of the Asian tree species are planted in the Japanese and Chinese gardens. The Japanese Garden and adjacent lake is one of the finest Asian gardens in North America. It could be a complete stand-alone institution and warrant major tourist traffic of its own. Yet it's just another inspiring part of Missouri Botanical Gardens seemingly endless variety.



Along with all the fountains, huge trees and specialty gardens one of the nation's very best conservatories entices visitors into a carefully recreated tropical rain forest. The Climatron was built in 1961, one of the first major geodesic domes built in the United States and the only conservatory at the time utilizing the remarkable architectural brainchild of Buckminster Fuller. For conservatory enthusiast it rarely gets better than the Climatron. Gentle, circuitous pathways meander through tropical plants from all over the world. Trees, shrubs, orchids, delicate begonias and bold heliconia's reveal the stunning growth forms and diversity of the planets wet equatorial forest. This is no heavenly, manicured glasshouse of perfectly pruned ornamental displays. It's a true botanical exhibit that embodies the magical diversity and fascination of

the wet tropics. The geodesic design is remarkable as no structural supports intrude into the vegetation. Add a few water falls, requisite humidity, the occasional insect or bird sounds and this conservatory goes further than most in recreating a tropical ecosystem.



What the public doesn't see at Missouri may be even more impressive than the gardens. Tucked away in a few discreet buildings, research staff study and catalogue the world's most endangered plants. The gardens Herbarium where preserved, pressed plants are kept is one of the world largest at seven million plus specimens. These "sheets" are the backbone of research at the garden. Missouri staff scientists work routinely in some of the world's most imperiled plant diversity hotspots. A long-term presence in Madagascar has helped conserve some

of the islands endemic plants. At the same time staff may be working in New Caledonia, Amazonia or Africa. Much of this work is chronicled in the gardens own impressive publishing office and vast library. Collectively, Missouri's research collections and scientific programs serve people all over the world in the quest to conserve plant diversity for human well-being.

A visit to Missouri Botanical Garden is more than a botanical or horticultural outing. Combined with the historic structures, enchanting landscape and excellent visitor amenities this garden is a cultural institution of global stature. The next time your headed west, don't miss what might well be America's finest public garden...in a city better known for beer, baseball and the Arch.



From the BGT Team-more info at [www.missouribotanicalgarden.org](http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org)

