

# THE PALM GARTEN: FRANKFURT'S GRAND BOTANICAL GARDEN



Many travelers to Europe and beyond transit Frankfurt's massive airport. Very often there are layovers, sometimes hours other times days. But the airport is a short train ride from Frankfurt's gleaming skyline and ever-clean city scape. Majestic skyscrapers mix with tree lined streets and intimate European cafes. Large well-kept parks are busy with strolling seniors, families and dogs. Set among these features is the lovely Palm Garten, one of Europe's finest public gardens.

The Palm Garten was designed by the landscape architect Heinrich Siesmayer. Modern Frankfurt features many public spaces influenced by Siesmayer's work. Opened to the public in 1871 the Palm Garten became a large attraction for Frankfurt socialites and ultimately an important repository for plants being collected in the wet and dry tropics. At the time Germany was a global leader in plant exploration. Much of systematic botany's early progress came from Germany scientists. One of the world's largest Herbarium collections was destroyed in Berlin during World War II. The Palm Garten also suffered major damage during the war. Following the American occupation the site was returned to city authorities in the fifties. After which a major renovation occurred.

At the entrance an important horticultural display is found. Several windmill palms are planted in front of the gate house. These are said to be the most cold-tolerant palms in the world. I



remember seeing them in Wuhan China where winter can be fairly cold. However, I'll never forget stumbling upon a large specimen in a Eugene, Oregon school yard. It was during a very cold and snowy winter storm. The broad fan-shaped fronds stood upright as if it was a sunny subtropical day. Since then plant breeders have created new varieties for cold tolerance. These trees appeared to be planted permanently. Windmill palms are known to grow in Virginia too.

The Palm Garten gatehouse is a curious entrance-way with a few tropical trees in the lobby, plus the front desk and gift shop. In this building the real treat is upstairs. Two separate rooms display a cacophonous collection of smaller tropical and subtropical plants. Several very large terrariums house different plants arranged by habitat. Surely the most fascinating is the carnivorous plant enclosure. Small enough to mimic micro-climates with

remarkable accuracy, tiny plants like sundew can be observed in remarkable detail. Next to them are the vase-like pitcher plants native to North America, with two species found in Virginia. These clever plants have evolved various traps to ensnare visiting insect. Once captured, the insects dissolve overtime providing nutrients for the plants. Gazing at these enclosures it occurred to me what wonderful teaching resource they are. At the same time a group of elementary students noisily arrived with work sheets in hand.

Once inside, the gardens 54 acres expands in several directions demarcated by beautiful seasonal beds expanding to formal pools and forested lakes. At the center is the House Rosenbrunn, a lovely light filled cottage surrounded by the colorful annual garden. Further afield is the Boat Pond where paddle boats can be rented. A notable rock garden sits above the lake and rhododendron garden skirts the north shore. A fine collection of temperate trees invites visitors to stroll in the shade. Heather gardens and a bamboo collection are located beyond the trees. As lovely as the outdoor collections are, it's the remarkable size and diversity of the conservatories that make the Palm Garten an institution of national prominence in Germany.

The traditional palm house is exceptionally large, the oldest of the conservatories, its devoted to the humid tropics. The moist, organic air immediately instills a sense of wonder as vines, palms huge ficus trees and bird nest ferns drip water in an atmospheric cooperative that could be cut with a knife. Like the most humid Virginia summer day all year. A large rock terrace with a stream and waterfall add an audible reality to the setting. Various local birds dart between tree

canopies in search of emerging fruits and insects. Like most conservatories it's a meticulously fabricated ecosystem under glass, but the size and plant diversity are truly engrossing.



Closer to the entrance is the Tropicarium, a modern collection of angular conservatoires interconnected and featuring the wet tropics of the world. Thus you can stroll through a patch of Amazonia, the Congo Basin, South East Asia, Queensland Australia or New Guinea and compare the differing plant species. Germany scientist and explorers largely invented the science of plant geography during the age of discovery. Much of this work was based on describing plants and forests as connected to landforms and geology. Many Germany universities still offer degrees in Geobotany. The Tropicarium embodies this noble tradition of German naturalists traveling the world. Indeed, there were several university classes being held during my visit. There's a another set of conservatories featuring the dry tropics with similar biogeographic themes. Once again student groups were diligently taking notes while an instructor discussed some unusual species from coastal Namibia.

The Palm Garten is an unparalleled classroom for students of plant science and anyone interested walking a remarkably well kept public garden. Exhibits, education and superb ornamental horticulture are all on display in addition to rotating art exhibits. Only a short train ride and urban stroll from the airport and one of Europe's great gardens is at your fingertips. That requisite layover in Frankfurt for long haul trips offers more options than waiting at the next departure gate.

From the BGT team-more info at [www.palmengarten.de](http://www.palmengarten.de)