The Conservatory

THE U.S. Botanic Garden Conservatory is a museum with a difference—its artifacts are the living treasures of the plant world. The towering leaves, graceful flowers, delicate seeds, and exotic fruits of plants at their peak are displayed artfully throughout the historic Conservatory. From the formal arrangement of the Garden Court, through the luxuriant greenery of the Jungle, to the spare elegance of the World Deserts, visitors are invited to explore this indoor Eden and appreciate the incredible beauty and variety of our planet's flora.

The mission of the U.S. Botanic Garden goes beyond celebrating the allure of plants, however. In order to promote an understanding of botanical knowledge, engaging displays present the facts and the fascinating stories of the plant world. Plants are present everywhere on the planet—from the steamiest lowlands to the coldest mountaintops—yet all too often they are overlooked and misunderstood, despite their importance to human survival. Without plants there would be few sources for food, medicine, clothing, shelter, and, most important, oxygen. People have a tremendous impact on plants, through discovery and cultivation, but also through destruction of plant habitats. Globally, about one out of every eight known plant species is threatened or nearing extinction. In the United States, the figure stands at about one out of every ten plant species. Conservatory exhibits bring these startling numbers to life by featuring endangered plants and demonstrating conservation strategies. A tour through the glorious green surroundings of the Conservatory is delightful to the senses and refreshing to the spirit, but visitors also leave with awareness of the many ways in which the destinies of humans and plants are intertwined.

(ABOVE)
DISCOVERING THE CONSERVATORY.
Plants appeal to the senses—visitors of all ages are captivated by the sights, smells, sounds, and textures that surround them in the Conservatory.

(OPPOSITE)
JUNGLE FOLIAGE.

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Garden Court

A curious transformation occurs in visitors as they cross the threshold into the welcoming expanse of the Garden Court—their expressions brighten. Encountering this lush interior landscape, a busy worker pauses, a tired tourist sighs, a harried parent smiles. Tall arches frame the glass roof that lights up the lofty space, even on a cloudy day. Softly splashing fountains fill the center of the two rectangular pools brimming with turquoise water. Around the pools, wide avenues provide room for strolling, observing, and photographing, while benches offer a place to rest. The dignified architecture serves as a suitable backdrop for hundreds of plants from around the globe. The spectacular greenery, from roof-tall trees to creeping ground covers, introduces the first of several important themes in the Conservatory—the economic value of plants to humans.

People rely on a wide variety of plants for many basic needs, including food, dyes, medicine, wood, fiber, flavoring, industrial products, fragrances, and cosmetics. The plants on display represent a tiny fraction of the botanical resources that have contributed to the economic well-being of cultures throughout the world. Though the plants themselves may not be familiar, their products certainly will be. Huge, floating leaves of banana trees (*Musa* 'Saba') conceal the familiar bunches of ripening fruit. Though each tall stalk looks like a separate tree, the plant is actually a clump of several stalks. As soon as the fruit has ripened, each stalk will die back, to be replaced by several new stalks as the cycle begins again. Other important food sources on display include chocolate (*Theobroma cacao*) from the Amazon Basin, tea (*Camellia sinensis*) from Southern Asia, and coconut (*Cocos nucifera*). Herbs and spices are represented by the cinnamon tree (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*), whose bark is used to produce the pungent flavoring, and by vanilla (*Vanilla planifolia*), a climbing orchid from Mexico and Central America that, outside of its

(above)
Amorphophallus bulbifer.

(opposite)
Garden Court fountains.

native range, must be hand-pollinated to increase production of its seeds. A number of the tall trees that line the Garden Court produce materials for building. Spanish mahogany (*Swietenia mahagani*) is renowned for its hard, deep red wood prized by cabinet-makers throughout the world. Native to the New World, the original West Indies mahogany was harvested to near extinction during Colonial days to meet European demands for its wood. Timber bamboo (*Bambusa vulgaris*), though actually a spreading grass, is used throughout Asia to build sturdy homes.

The Garden Court is also a grand venue for temporary exhibits, elegant receptions, and seasonal celebrations. Outstanding flowers and ornamental plants provide accents of dazzling color against the backdrop of flourishing green. Graceful arrangements spotlight the classic beauty of flowers from the Botanic Garden's greenhouses, including orchids, lilies, chrysanthemums, poinsettias, cyclamens, anthuriums, heliconia, and many more.

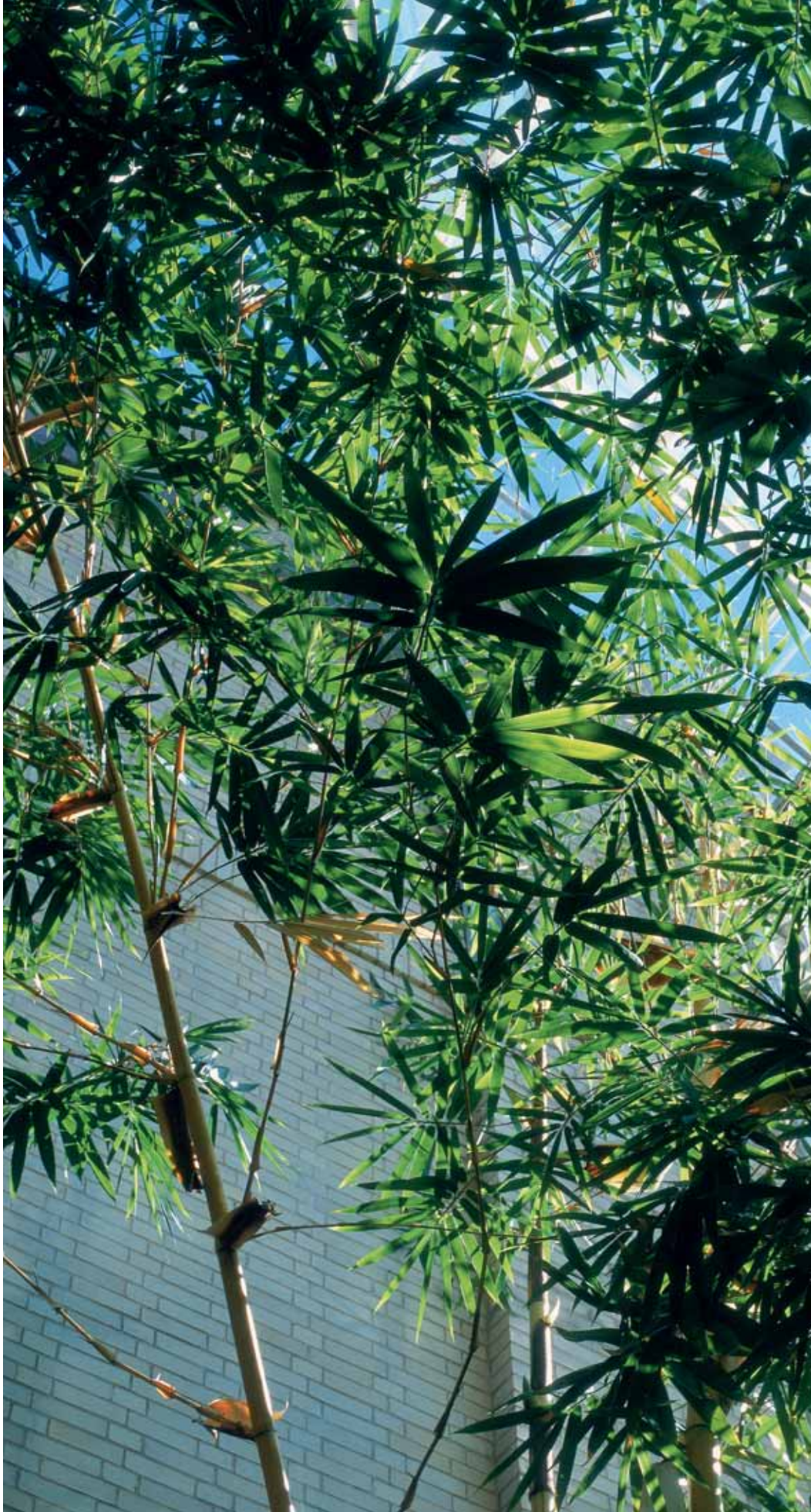
(top)
Orchids displayed among theatrical temple ruins during the annual orchid exhibit.

(right)
Cacao (*Theobroma cacao*).
Blossoms burst from the trunk of a cacao tree.

(right below)
A painter takes inspiration from the Botanic Garden's flower displays.

(far right)
Orchid (*Phaius tankervilliae*).

(opposite)
Light spills across the stone floor of the Garden Court.



(center)

Timber bamboo
(*Bambusa vulgaris* 'Vittata').

Strong, lightweight bamboo poles are used throughout Asia for a number of purposes, including construction of houses and fences. Although technically not a wood but a giant grass, timber bamboo stalks grow as thick as four inches in diameter and are a remarkable resource for sturdy and durable building materials.

(opposite above)

Coffee
(*Coffea arabica*).

Bright red fruits line the branches of this coffee tree, *Coffea arabica*. Of the more than five dozen species in the world, three are commonly grown, of which *C. arabica* produces the most desirable beans. Hot coffee became a popular drink in Europe in the 1600s, though people had been chewing leaves and beans long before then.

(opposite below)

Vanilla orchid
(*Vanilla planifolia*).

U.S. Botanic Garden

(right above)

Sugar cane
(*Saccharum officinarum*).

Arab traders brought this South Pacific grass to India and the Near East in the seventh century. Columbus found it in the eastern Atlantic and brought it to the Caribbean. Forests were stripped to grow sugar cane, and slaves were later imported to cultivate the fields.

(right below)

Banana flower and fruit
(*Musa* 'Ice Cream').

The striking purple cone and red tongue of the banana flower hang beneath the ripening fruit. Once the banana bunch has ripened, the stalk will die back to be replaced in the next growing cycle by several new stalks.

Titan arum
(*Amorphophallus titanum*).

The dramatic blossoming of the titan arum, the world's largest flowering structure, attracted thousands of visitors to the Garden Court of the Botanic Garden in 2003. Also known as the corpse flower for the terrible stench that accompanies blossoming, this native of Sumatra can take eight to ten years to bloom.