SMITHSONIAN AND U.S. BOTANIC GARDEN ENTER PARTNERSHIP

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and the United States Botanic Garden have established a formal partnership that will utilize the strengths of both organizations to produce a vigorous program of expanded research and exhibitions in botany and horticulture.

“The Botany Department at the Smithsonian and USBG are two of the nation’s oldest and preeminent botanical organizations,” said Dr. John Kress, Chair of Botany at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. “By combining the research and education resources of both organizations we will be able to pursue new avenues in botany and horticulture, while bringing exciting public presentations on plant exploration and discovery to both our audiences.”

Both institutions had their beginnings in 1818 with the formation of the Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences in Washington, D.C. In 1842, Lt. Charles Wilkes returned from the first U.S. Exploring Expedition with living plant collections and botanical specimens. Eventually the plants were housed in the USBG, established in 1850, and the plant specimens formed the basis of the new National Herbarium of the Smithsonian Institution, chartered in 1846.

“Traditions in Elegance,” an exhibition celebrating the history and enjoyment of tea, will be the first joint exhibition. Set to open at the USBG in January 2003, the exhibition will feature exquisite antique teapots and vintage tea-related accouterments, as well as a presentation on the botanical origins of tea, curated by Smithsonian scientists.

Public collaboration will continue with the exhibition “A Passion for Plants: Contemporary Art from the Sherwood Collection,” which is slated to open at the National Museum of Natural History in March 2003. Featuring an extraordinary presentation of botanical paintings, the exhibition will explore the interplay between art and science from the perspective of style, form, purpose, use and content. The exhibition will also address the history of botanical art and
illustration from ancient herbals through the “golden age” of botanical art from 1740 to 1840 to works of the 20th century. Dr. Shirley Sherwood’s comprehensive collection of contemporary botanical art encompasses nearly 200 artists from more than 20 countries and documents the renaissance of this art form. “A Passion for Plants” will be on view through Sept. 1, 2003.

Scientific activities include USBG support and sponsorship of the Smithsonian’s annual Botanical Symposium, which brings together international botanists to discuss current issues in the botanical sciences. The 2003 Symposium will be held in Washington, March 28 - 29, 2003, and will focus on the “Botanical Frontiers in Southeast Asia.”

Other research activities will include the propagation of living plants and multiplication of germplasm resources of those plant families of mutual interest for research and exhibition; the development of a joint program on the conservation of endangered plants locally, nationally and internationally; and the establishment of a common field-collecting program to enhance the living and research collections of both the National Museum of Natural History and the U.S. Botanic Garden.

Future exhibitions will feature displays of specimens from the museum, including the Wilkes collection.

Exhibitions and public presentations will also include presentations of botanical illustrations, artwork and specimens from the Smithsonian and USBG collections; an exhibition focusing on endangered and threatened plants; an exhibition on plant exploration, field work; and related research and horticultural activities of Washington area botanical institutions.

The partnership will also emphasize environmental education and conservation. Among the plans are an evening lecture series focusing on botanical research and exploration at the Natural History Museum and USBG; a noon-time lecture series at USBG, featuring Natural History Museum botany staff and visiting scientists; and the development of Web links that focus on environmental and biodiversity resources at the Natural History Museum and USBG.

“After more than 150 years from the time of their formation, these two distinguished plant institutions will once again join forces for the promotion and appreciation of the botanical and horticultural sciences,” said Kress.

The National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue, N.W., welcomed more than 8.4 million people during the year 2001, making it the most visited natural history museum in the world. Opened in 1910, the Museum is dedicated to maintaining and preserving the world’s most extensive collection of natural history specimens and human artifacts. It also fosters critical scientific research as well as educational programs and exhibitions that present the work of its scientists and curators to the public. The Museum is part of the Smithsonian Institution, the world’s largest museum and research complex. The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History is open every day from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free.

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