Matthaei-Nichols: Transformative & Transforming

Our spaces provide the elemental contact with nature found by researchers to be beneficial to human well-being.

The Great Lakes Gardens, above, opened at Matthaei Botanical Gardens last April. Planted with thousands of regional native species and featuring native orchids, ferns, and other plants of our woodlands, oak openings, prairies, and coastal areas, the Gardens offers visitors the opportunity to see native plants up close and demonstrates our commitment to environmental stewardship. Together with another new space, the Bonsai & Penjing Garden, The Great Lakes Gardens transformed the grounds at Matthaei and opened up a world of new experience for members, visitors, and students.

The more things change… Reading our inaugural 1974 newsletter in preparation for this story I was struck by the Friends mission statement from that year. It articulated the goals of the Botanical Gardens’ newly formed and 90-person-strong membership program: “to give aid of various kinds to the Gardens and to give people with an interest or affection for the Gardens an opportunity to have a closer association with it.”

We’ve continued to refine and add to that mission statement over time, including the addition of the Friends of Nichols Arboretum in 1991 with over 100 charter members. Today we represent four properties under one organization at the University of Michigan—Matthaei Botanical Gardens, Nichols Arboretum, Horner-McLaughlin Woods, and Mud Lake Bog. But in the main, our mission remains the same as it was forty years ago: caring for nature, enriching life. Through those years, the Friends have played a transformative role in shaping Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum.

What do we mean by transformative? First, the way our members, U-M students and faculty, and visitors review and revitalize our ideas through their ideas, fresh approaches to old problems, and continuing support. For instance, membership gifts provide critical funding for our summer internships. Each summer the indoor and outdoor spaces here course with the youthful energy of dozens of U-M students working in our internship program. The creativity and dedication of our interns breathe life into all of our offerings throughout the summer, allowing us to maintain our properties and programs at a level that just wouldn’t be possible without their help. It also touches on our core mission by providing genuine professional development and educational opportunities for University of Michigan students.

Donor gifts transform us, too. Elizabeth Needham (Betsy) Graham (A.B. ’46) was a force for nature at Matthaei Botanical Gardens from the early 80s until her death last February. The first of more than 50 donors to honor her were Donald C. (B.S.E. ’55, M.S.E. ’56) and Ingrid A. Graham (B.S. Des. ’57), Betsy’s former brother-in-law and her wife, who committed $200,000 to create the Elizabeth Needham Graham Internship in her memory. With this generous memorial, an Elizabeth Needham Graham Intern will oversee an ambitious collection of native Michigan trees that Betsy envisioned years ago and garner a valuable summer experience in the process.

Stewarding our culturally and historically significant plant collections forms a central part of our mission. Over 90 years ago, W.E. Upjohn, founder of the Upjohn Company in Kalamazoo, donated a significant number of peonies from his personal collection. Recently, descendants of Dr. Upjohn made a $500,000 gift to conserve and enhance what he began. The gift, the largest endowment gift in Matthaei-Nichols history, establishes the W.E. Upjohn Peony Garden Fund. The Nichols Arboretum Peony Garden represents the largest collection of heirloom peonies in North America. With the Upjohn’s gift we can continue to develop, expand, and maintain the Peony Garden and bring together leading practitioners in modern horticulture, plant conservation, landscape history, and the arts from the university and beyond.

What do mean by transforming? In 2013 the Bonsai and Penjing Garden and the Great Lakes Gardens opened, in large part thanks to more than $1,000,000 from an anonymous donor for their construction. Our current bonsai collection of more than 70 plants began in 1997 with a gift of trees from the estate of Dr. Maurice Seevers, a former director of the U-M Department of Pharmacology and an ardent bonsai lover. The garden demonstrates the international scope of horticulture and in its use of native and traditional materials and in how it connects us with the University and local Japanese and Chinese communities.

The Great Lakes Gardens stand out as an example of our mission of “caring for nature.” Within this garden’s spaces we’ve planted hundreds of Great Lakes native plants, many of them endangered or of special concern. Unique among native-plant gardens, the Great Lakes Gardens recreate the habitats of the region such as dune, woodland, and wetland. The gardens offer visitors a rare opportunity to see many native plants up close and to learn about their conservation.

The Campus Farm at Matthaei is now in its second year. This living classroom of sustainable agriculture draws students from across the university, provides a connection to local food, and offers the benefits of learning and community. If you haven’t visited the Farm yet, stop by any time the Botanical Gardens is open.

All of our Friends members who have touched our lives and our work here over the years remind us of the elemental experience of contact with nature, contact that many researchers have found to be beneficial to human well-being. In 2014 we’re honoring those decades of tradition and looking to the next 40 years of Matthaei-Nichols with the launch of a major Friends membership campaign. Campaign goals aim to significantly grow our membership numbers and increase commitment from our current members. The 2014 membership campaign also coincides with the University’s next capital fundraising campaign. Look for more news of that as 2014 unfolds.

Please join us in celebration of the many years of a botanical garden and arboretum at the University of Michigan—and the many years to come.

Bob Grese, Director
Matthaei Botanical Gardens & Nichols Arboretum

Appreciative visitors last spring wound amid the dazzling blooms of pink, white, and red in the Nichols Arboretum Peony Garden, the largest collection of heirloom peonies in North America. The Peony Garden celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2012, making the 1922 date of the original gift of peonies from Dr. W.E. Upjohn, an avid peony collector and founder of the Upjohn Company in Kalamazoo. Thanks to a $500,000 gift from the Upjohn family we can provide ongoing stewardship of this important garden and, along with generous gifts from the Porter Family Foundation and Philip and Kathy Power and grants from the Stanley Smith Horticultural Trust and the Institute for Museum and Library Services we’ll also continue work on the Peonies Initiative, a multi-year renovation project to transform the Nichols Arboretum Peony Garden into an internationally recognized reference collection, a conservation model for other historic cultivar collections, and a destination for peony lovers. (Photo courtesy Michele Fangia.)

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A Year of Pictures

Illustrates our motto: caring for nature, enriching life

Carol L. Brandon

Woman's National Farm and Garden Research Endowment Fund

Julie Norris Post Fund

MBGNA Fund

Nanette R. LaCross Fund

Carol Holbrook Memorial Fund

Jean A. Forrest Endowment Fund

William D. Drake Fund

Winifred B. Chase Fellowship

Rudolph E. Reichert, Jr.

The Reader Family

The Graham Foundation

Thomas and Jeanette Gaffield

DTE Foundation

The Andrah Foundation

Anonymous (over $100,000)

at the $250 and above level for fiscal year 2013 (July 1, 2012–June 30, 2013) and cumulative lifetime supporters, endowments, and planned giving and bequests.

A $117,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) funds an assessment of the at-risk native plants and ecosystems to map and assess the communities for conservation care to create a set of natural area stewardship recommendations.

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Bruce Dancik

Ellie T. Cox

Phelps and Jean Connell

Edward and Teresa Chadwick

Burton and Dixie Barnes

David E. Baker

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William and Bernadette Haston

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