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Arboretum goes global with exhibit

Down Under, over the sea and in our backyard

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P-I REPORTER

Anyone who ever wanted to circle the globe in less than 80 days, here's your chance.

Beginning Saturday, visitors to the Washington Park Arboretum can experience in a short walk the look and feel of five distinct Pacific Rim botanical zones -- New Zealand, Australia, China, Chile and Cascadia.

Pacific Connections, the arboretum's newest and most ambitious exhibit in nearly 75 years, makes a walk in the park feel like a stroll through the pages of National Geographic.

Each newly landscaped garden, or eco-zone, features cultivars, carefully selected botanical and cultural representatives of each country. They include iconic plants such as the monkey puzzle tree (Chile), Ginkgo biloba (China), gum tree (Australia), New Zealand flax and Western red cedar (Cascadia).

"The project is unprecedented in scope and scale in the history of the Arboretum," said David Zuckerman, the arboretum's horticulturist for the past 25 years. The arboretum opened in 1934.

Paige Miller, executive director of the Arboretum Foundation, the park's private fundraising arm, agreed. While the 3-acre Japanese Garden was a huge undertaking, she said, Pacific Connections ultimately will be larger -- 14 acres total -- and more complex, not just in biodiversity but because of international regulations, permitting and transporting requirements.

Which is why, Miller added, the arboretum has dispatched the best botanists to search for plants, particularly "hunter" Dan Hinkley, owner of the former Heronswood Nursery.

The exhibit's first phase, opening Saturday, takes up about three acres. Yet it is already is a striking transformation from the meadow that had transplantable collections and in some places, invasive plants.

The new plants, shrubs and trees are arranged to show seasonal differences among foreign and native plants able to thrive in Northwest conditions.

Walk the path from the Graham Visitors Center, and the arboretum's collection of maples, oaks, cedars, evergreens, rhododendrons and other standout species give way to entirely different landscapes.

A tropical tree, reminiscent of a palm, greets those entering the New Zealand garden. The 15-foot Cordyline australis stands near the arboretum's prized holly tree collection, which has been transplanted to a site north of the Japanese Garden. Surrounding the "palm" is a profusion of plants and Latin names -- Griselinia littoralis, Carex flagellifera, Veronica topiaria and Hebes.

Bamboo, unusually broad-leafed rhododendrons and Cardiocrinum giganteums -- with flowers that bloom every seven years -- grace the China exhibit.

At the edge of the circle-rimmed gardens lies a new, hand-carved cedar interpretive shelter, reminiscent of a sacred temple on top of Mount Emei, in China's Sichuan Province. Visitors can read about the plants in various zones, and locate them on a blue stone and glass mosaic globe beneath their feet.

Ultimately, a grand staircase will be built, descending from the site west to the Japanese Garden, Miller said.

The shelter's cedar logs came from trees downed or damaged in past windstorms, and were carved with cultural patterns from each country. The shelter's green roof was planted with sedums, strawberry and other plants that help filter rainwater, slowing storm water runoff.

Miller likened Pacific Connection's "eco-geographic" grouping of plants and trees to Woodland Park Zoo's approach to animal exhibits. The zoo shifted years ago from grouping similar species, as in the Ape House and Feline House, to more habitat-oriented exhibits like the African Savannah, where varieties of animals roam.

"When the zoo did that, visitors got to see how animals lived together, and it was a totally different experience," Miller said. "Here, people can see whole plant communities growing together, from the tree canopy to the forest floor."

Funding for Pacific Connection's first phase came from a partnership among the University of Washington's Botanic Gardens, Seattle Parks and Recreation and the Arboretum Foundation.

The foundation raised \$2.2 million from private donations, which leveraged a \$600,000 match from the city of Seattle's pro-parks levy.

The latter helped pay for plant research, procurement and a new, main pipeline for the Pacific Connection's state-of-the-art irrigation system.

MORE INFO

- The first phase of the Pacific Connections exhibit opens Saturday at the Washington Park Arboretum with a celebration from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. The event includes garden tours (12:15 and 2:15 p.m.), storytellers, Native American drummers, an Australian didgeridoo player and music performers from Chile and Latin America.
- The Washington Park Arboretum is at 2300 Arboretum Drive E., Seattle 98112.
- For more information:

www.arboretumfoundation.org

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