We all know that plants are amazing, beautiful, and fascinating, and I’d be willing to bet that this is the reason we work at public gardens. However, I fear this “world of wonder” remains largely invisible to the average person. If you stopped someone on the street and asked what he or she thinks about plants, what kind of response do you think you would get? As professionals we need to find a way to expose what is still a well-kept secret.

At our various institutions, we have probably all struggled with how to get the general public excited about plants. Connecting people with plants is very basic to our missions. At the same time we struggle with issues of increasing our gardens’ visibility, visitation, and revenue streams. The world today offers much competition for the attention of our potential visitors, who are rather disconnected from the plant world. In this climate, exhibitions can be an extremely effective tool. Changing exhibitions are a perfect way to attract people to our gardens with the offer of something new, capture them at a “wow” moment, and then further engage them. Fostering that engagement and leading our visitors to develop that sense of wonder about the plant world is what I focus on in our exhibition program at the Botanic Garden of Smith College.

We are located at a small liberal arts college, and as such, our mission includes education as its main component. Our exhibitions follow suit. Our primary audience is always the college community; however, we also serve the general public and local schools. When we began our exhibition program in 2002, we had just completed a major renovation of our facility and had a new exhibition gallery. I am fortunate to work at an institution that encourages creativity and innovation; my director, Michael Marcotrigiano, in particular, sees the value of our eclectic approach and has been very supportive.

Rachel Carson’s writing provides much inspiration for me. In The Sense of Wonder, she observed how much her nephew

Rachel Carson, The Sense of Wonder
Whenever people choose to visit public gardens, they come looking for an experience. Once inside, they discover something different from what they might find at home or during other leisure-time activities. Exhibitions are important in helping to shape that experience. I try to remember that exhibitions are environments where people are affected sensually, emotionally, and intellectually. They may be moved by something beautiful, startled by something bizarre, intrigued by something novel, or even repulsed by something disgusting. That is the point of entry—a successful exhibit takes people places and opens their eyes to something new. The big question is how to accomplish this.

A good start is to look at your institution’s strengths and to capitalize on them. At the Botanic Garden of Smith College, we decided to use the college’s resources to our advantage and investigated how we could collaborate with other academic departments and programs to approach our botanical subject in a whole new way to create new interdisciplinary entryways and connections. This has resulted in the development of some unusual exhibits that we might not have otherwise imagined.

Carson suggests that we try to be acutely aware of what regularly goes unnoticed. One way to achieve this is to approach our subject matter as if we are seeing it for the first time and imagining we might never see it again. Can we step out of our regular roles as educators providing “information” and enter a new mode? I see this as a challenge—to bring a new way of seeing to how we create exhibits and interact with our audiences.

Intentionally operating outside our comfort zone has been quite a learning experience for us. We are presenting our subject in ways that often require some stretching on our part. Even if you are not at a college or university garden, you can collaborate with other institutions (including academic ones) and community members to achieve these kinds of synergistic partnerships. Consider museums, television shows, city parks, publishers and authors, local retailers, and community clubs and organizations. There are many opportunities out there. I will describe a selection of our exhibits to illustrate the range of options possible, limited only by imagination (and, perhaps, one’s budget).

Our first exhibition inaugurated the new gallery with a splash and much surprise. We collaborated with two math professors to produce Plant Spirals: Beauty You Can Count On. The exhibit featured a novel way for most of our visitors to look at and relate to plants. We introduced concepts of Fibonacci Numbers and the Golden Mean, phyllotaxy models, spiral patterns seen microscopically in meristems, spiral lattices, and more. The exhibit used an extremely bright color scheme,
stunning photos, and video footage. As the viewer went through the exhibit some of the material became quite challenging, e.g. the “universe of spirals.” The exhibit was everything we had hoped for — it provided a very new entryway into the world of plants for both scientists and artists. People reported being both surprised and intrigued.

Next we took off in a totally different direction, working with the English Department, the library’s rare book room, and the international Virginia Woolf Conference, to present Virginia Woolf: A Botanical Perspective. This exhibition showcased the gardens of Woolf’s family and friends, her sister Vanessa Bell’s botanical artwork from the dust jackets of Woolf’s books (available to us through the library), botanical descriptions from Woolf’s writings, and original hand-printed editions of her short story, Kew Gardens. Since we send students to Kew on an internship we were able to make a connection there. Through the conference we were able to take advantage of scholars around the country who shared some of their work with us, including a PowerPoint display on Woolf’s house and gardens. Faculty and staff shared photos they had taken of various gardens, so we were able to involve more people in the making of this show.

Some of our exhibits have been developed to draw attention to our students and alumnae. Smith Chrysanthemums: Hybrid Alums displayed the history of a century of Chrysanthemum Shows and student breeding work at Smith College. A major element of that show was the Chrysanthemum Hall of Fame, showing yearbook photos going back to 1920 of student hybridizers with the mums they produced (also a favorite for studying changing hairdos). Last year we updated it and showed it again. Inevitably visitors come looking for a photo of themselves or someone they have heard is shown there. Also popular with alumnae was Designed Landscapes, which featured the work of twenty Smith College graduates who are landscape architects and garden designers. We were able to display some materials from the College Archives that included plans drawn by Alice Orme Smith (Class of 1911, and probably the first alumna to become a landscape architect), who won awards for her designs of the Garden of Religion and the Main Vista at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City. Other projects displayed covered a wide range—from road planning at Yellowstone National Park, to urban landscapes and a plan for the renovation of one of our gardens. Additionally, the exhibit gave students new ideas for career paths.

A historical perspective was featured in The Botanical Discoveries of Lewis and Clark, which was based on a book written by a Smith graduate. It included excerpts from the book with watercolors of the
Exhibits as a Way In

In between our in-house exhibits, traveling exhibits, and often rented by non-botanical institutions. The success of this exhibit which offers new provocative titles for each of the adaptions: “V egetarians,” “Social Climbers,” “Guzzlers,” “Meat Eaters,” “Sunbathers,” “Drifters,” and “Squatters.” A special kid’s guide and workbook required children to find the actual plants in our collection. We were able to make a book connection as well, bringing Sydney Eddison to speak on container gardening. No End to the Banana, produced by Bioversity International, brought to life the uncommon story of this common fruit — everything you ever wanted to know about bananas and more. It included the story of how the banana we eat and love is threatened and what is being done to save it. And we displayed an unexpected assortment of products made from banana fiber. And, again we made a book connection, this time with Dan Koeppe and his book, The Trouble with Bananas.

The New England Wild Flower Society’s exhibit, Rare and Endangered Plants of New England, acquainted visitors with some of our native flora. The photographs and text invited visitors to look closely at four different habitats and the beauty they offer, and then gain an understanding of how that beauty is threatened. TulipMania, produced by the Chicago Botanic Garden was a good tie-in with our annual Spring Bulb Show—since that always draws about 20,000 visitors to the garden over a two-week period, we figured it was an excellent opportunity to expand people’s consciousness about the world of bulbs and to work cooperatively with a sister garden.

With improved exhibit fabrication, several of our exhibits are now available to travel to other institutions, and that has enabled us to expand our reach even further. Even after we have taken our exhibits off our walls, they can continue to influence how people engage with plants. After all the work we put into these incredible educational ventures, I never want to take down any of the exhibits! Fortunately, they all live on in virtual format (even the 3-D images work online if you have the glasses). You can see them at: www.smith.edu/garden/exhibits/past-exhibitions.html.

Using a variety of approaches has served us well in our exhibition program. It has been pretty successful in bringing to light very different aspects of the world of plants, providing visually interesting elements that draw people in and engage them on several levels. What makes me the happiest is when I overhear someone say something like, “Wow, isn’t that cool?!” or “Look at this—I didn’t know that!” For me, that sense of wonder is the ultimate success.

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