

*“Botanizing” at the
Missouri Botanical
Garden, 1890.*



ample, collections of ericaceous plants called “American gardens” could be found across England.

In the nineteenth century the capacity of botany to teach and reform made it a proper hobby for an increasingly broad audience including women and young children. What had been a scholarly, then a genteel, interest became a widespread phenomenon among the working class. The study of plants and their collection, called “botanizing,” prompted the formation of botanical clubs that organized excursions and fieldwork. Interest was no longer limited to exotic specimens brought from afar; amateur collectors were drawn to the native plants that could be gathered nearby. Scrutinizing mosses, dissecting flowers, and organizing flowering plants by petal color became popular activities (Shaw himself made scrapbooks of pressed flowers for two young ladies

who lived near him in the city). Magazines such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book* published articles entitled “Botany as a Study for Young Ladies” and “The Collection and Preservation of Plants,” and children learned the subject in textbooks such as Asa Gray’s *Botany for Young People and Common Schools* (1858). Soon amateur botany would evolve into a broader field of interest, referred to as “Nature-Study” by the horticulturalist Liberty Hyde Bailey and his contemporaries, which taught youngsters to appreciate the whole of the environment.

The popularity of botany was fueled in part by the nineteenth-century spirit of reform. Botanizing combined physical exercise with the gathering of practical knowledge, promoted intellectual development by improving one’s ability to observe and classify information, and enhanced mental discipline by improving memory and reasoning.⁷ It added not only to personal knowledge but to the country’s knowledge of its own natural history. Contemporary sources praised the characteristic that Henry Shaw appreciated most: botany’s ability to promote gentility—refinement, respectability, and politeness—characteristics necessary for a cultivated life. The study of botany was seen as a means of improving the young and the poor, of making wiser people and better citizens, of elevating society. It was in this nineteenth-century context of reform and education that botany, the science that combined “pleasure with improvement,”⁸ had its greatest impact.

Henry Shaw remained intimately engaged at his garden and park until his death at eighty-nine years of age, even handling the payroll personally until one month before he died. Seeing the public enjoy and learn at the garden and park was his “bright and unfailing pleasure.”⁹ For forty years, he could, from the tower of his villa, take in the garden’s parterres and observation tower to the north or work being done in the kitchen gardens to the south; in the distance he could distinguish the trees and drives of Tower Grove Park. His appreciation for parks as vehi-



Garden beds organized by plant type: a mix of cacti at the main gate, 1898.



Flower bed planting organized in paisley motif, 1891.

ened at the edges by circuit walks that flowed around the perimeter, but the cross axes were reinforced by arrow-straight paths from corner to corner. Even trees in the arboretum were planted in rows, strengthening its affinity to a nursery (which was one of its uses) rather than to natural woods.⁶⁰ This linear planting created a strong visual pattern, one that evokes the custom of planting trees in quincunx formations, a practice Shaw would have known from his European travels and his appreciation of Renaissance art.⁶¹ Such arrangement was decorative in effect but also facilitated study, underscoring resemblances and differences between plants.⁶² By organizing groups of like plants into rows, with paths to each side of the beds, one could view specimens with greatest clarity. The use of uniform rows as an ordering device allowed visitors to view plants from both sides and as the garden



Ribbon bedding planted with alternating rows of Echeveria, 1910.

attested to by time sheets and photographs.⁷⁹ Early accounts refer to these workers as Bohemian immigrants; some of them were fathers and sons from the large German population of St. Louis at the time. Photographs capture Gurney at ease on nasturtium-patterned garden seats, possibly those Shaw ordered from Coalbrookdale, England; fashionably positioned atop giant water lilies; and proudly at attention among his team of employees.

Gurney's botanical contribution was in the area of water lily propagation and cultivation. Joseph Paxton had successfully coaxed the giant *Victoria* into bloom at Chatsworth in 1849 (and was knighted for being the first to do so), marking the real beginning of water lily mania in England; countless amateur gardeners and experts, as well as Queen Victoria herself, were infatuated with their exoticism.⁸⁰ The plant's enormous leaves, which can grow to six feet in diameter and hold afloat many pounds of weight, are supported by an inflated network of ribs below the water surface. Their blooms, which change in color from white to pink to red, last only forty-eight hours. As their increased use in botanical and public gardens spread to the United States and ultimately to the Midwest, Gurney's expertise in the area of breeding became celebrated. His success in creating a tricolor striped lily (red, white, and blue) established him as an important contributor to the field. (Many new tropical water lilies were bred in the 1920s and 1930s at the Missouri Botanical Garden, where they are still featured today.)

Architectural additions and the "proper accessories" Shaw spoke of were an important part of the improvements made between 1867 and 1889. Most important was the construction of the 1868 glass palm house based, according to Shaw, on Paxton's Chatsworth conservatory and the Crystal Palace in London, which was erected just south of the original row of plant houses along the north wall. Of a scale and design befitting an important institution, this main conservatory stood adjacent to the sunken parterre and provided a visual terminus for the garden's primary axis. It provided dramatic improvement over the first plant



Garden visitors enjoying the Victoria regia pool.

The fashionable practice of having one's picture taken on a Victoria lily pad, 1890.





The western meadow.

Photo by Carol Betsch.

bridges would not be completed until 1871, but Shaw had determined their location. The eastern length of the park would be bisected by a processional central drive with occasional “turnouts” accompanied by meandering secondary circuit walks of brick, gravel, and grass. In contrast, the western portion would consist of an unbroken meadow (and accompanying views) framed by pedestrian walks along the perimeter. Plowing and cultivating of soil, and sowing of blue grass and timothy on



View into the meadow.

Photo by Carol Betsch.



Pedestrian bridge.

Photo by Carol Betsch.

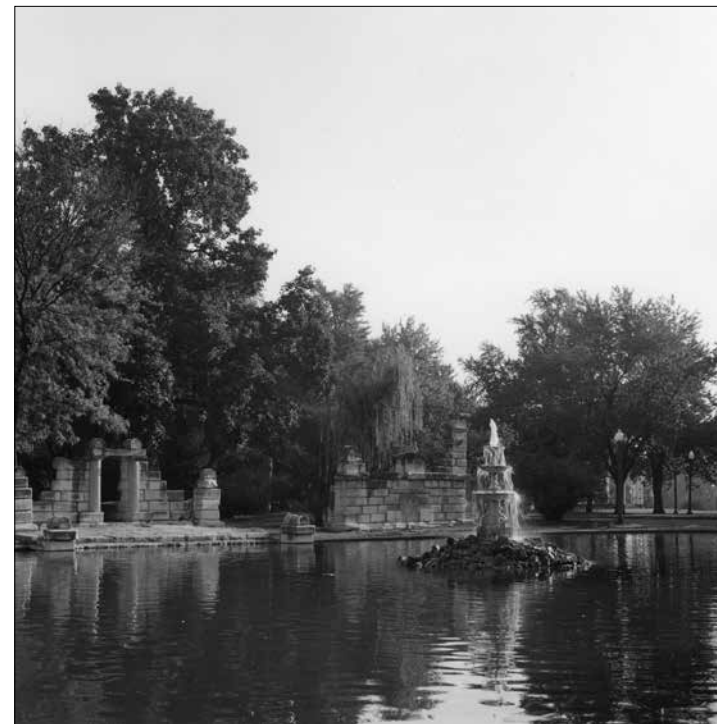
*Old Playground
Pavilion.
Photo by Carol Betsch.*



*View to the
Carriage Pavilion.
Photo by Carol Betsch.*



*Sailboat pond and
mock ruins, ca. 1880.*



*The pond and ruins
in early morning.
Photo by Carol Betsch.*



Park trees in late afternoon.

Photo by Carol Betsch.

that met there. Contemporaries called the park “a gem of sparkling beauty,” filled with bowers and vine-clad trellises, accented with artistic bridges, pagodas, and fountains.⁶⁴ Visitors slipped in through pedestrian gates to stroll the “shady and agreeable” Evergreen Walk, or “ramble through the pleasant scenes, making detours to the right or left as occasion may require.”⁶⁵ Those “taxed and wearied by metropolitan life” could rest; others could take in the exhibition of evergreens, deciduous trees, and



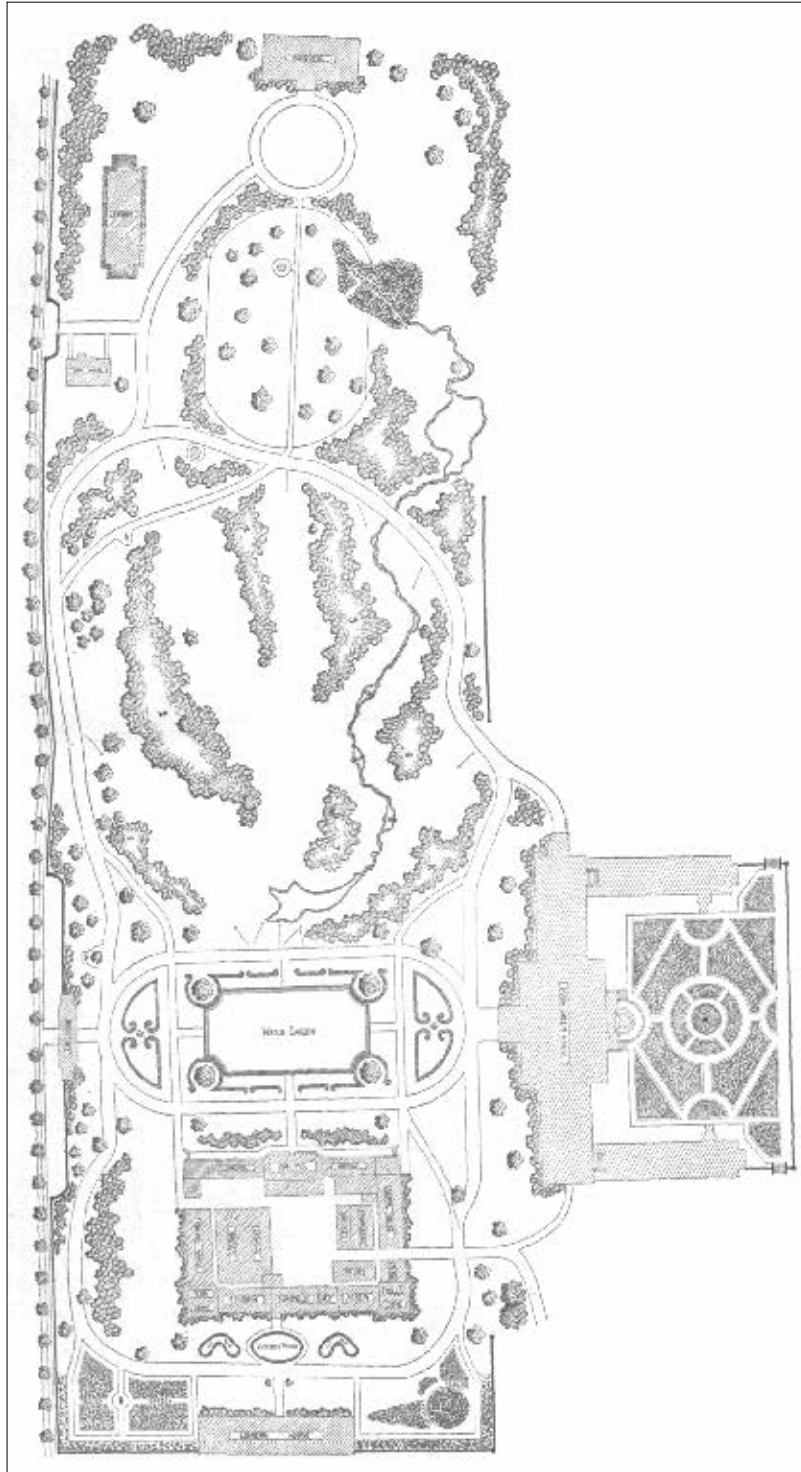
Silver maples.

Photo by Carol Betsch.

shrubs, a composition of nature and art, where labeled specimens transformed looking into learning.

On Sunday, June 23, 1878, six years after it opened, Shaw recorded the number of visitors and their means of entry. From the east gate (the gate closest to the city limits) 683 carriages entered, as did fifteen saddle horses. Through the west gate passed 383 carriages and thirteen saddle horses, and from the north gate 246 carriages and one horse and rider. Four hundred one pedes-

Plan for the Missouri Botanical Garden, with contributions by John Noyes, ca. 1917.



OPPOSITE:
*Palm House,
October 1914.*

*Planting palms in the
Palm House, 1913.*

