

## Brief History of the U.S. Botanic Garden

The United States Botanic Garden is the oldest continuously operating public garden in the United States. The Garden is rooted in the nation's heritage. In the late 18th century, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison shared the dream of a national botanic garden and were instrumental in establishing the Garden in 1820. George Washington's letter where he wrote in support of a botanic garden in the new federal city is currently on display in the Library of Congress.

The institution traces its beginning to 1816, when the constitution of the Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences in Washington, D.C., provided for a botanic garden to collect, grow and distribute plants of this and other countries that might contribute to the welfare of the American people.

**On May 8, 1820, the President James Madison signed a bill passed by the U.S. Congress designating land** for the garden to the west of the Capitol Building, from First Street to Third Street between Pennsylvania and Maryland Avenues. This facility functioned until 1837, shortly after the organization stopped holding meetings there.

**In 1842, the idea of a national botanic garden was reestablished** when the United States Exploring Expedition to the South Seas (the Wilkes Expedition) returned with living plants from around the globe to Washington, D.C. These form the first permanent collection of plants for the U.S. Botanic Garden, and four plants in the collection date back to this expedition. The plants were kept in a specially constructed greenhouse behind the Old Patent Office Building while a new Conservatory for the collection was built between 1842-1850.

**The Victorian Conservatory opened to the public in 1850** and the U.S. Botanic Garden has been in continuous operation and open to the public this day.

**The Garden moved to its present location in 1933**, a complex located along the north and south sides of Independence Avenue bordered by First Street to the north and Third Street to the south. The Garden includes the Conservatory, which was renovated from 1997-2001; the National Garden, which opened in 2006; and Bartholdi Park, which was dedicated in 1934. A production and support facility opened in Anacostia in 1993, which includes 85,000 square feet under glass divided into 34 greenhouse bays in addition to other facilities.

The U.S. Botanic Garden was formally placed under the jurisdiction of the Joint Committee on the Library of Congress in 1856 and has been administered by the Architect of the Capitol since 1934. The Architect of the Capitol has served as Acting Director of the U.S. Botanic Garden and is responsible for the maintenance and operation of the Garden and for any construction, changes or improvements made.

Media Resources:

200th Anniversary History Program Part 1



**The U.S. Botanic Garden's First Conservatory** This 1858 photograph shows the Conservatory constructed eight years earlier (in 1850). The accompanying text describes the conservatory's location on a 10-acre site extending from First Street to Third Street between Pennsylvania and Maryland Avenues SW. *Architect of the Capitol*



The Conservatory, expanded in 1867, consisted of a central dome and two wings 300 feet long. This photograph also shows where the Bartholdi Fountain of the first Conservatory from 1877 until 1927. *Architect of the Capitol*



This 1912 photograph shows some of the outside gardens and the central dome of the Palm House of the Victorian Conservatory. *Architect of the Capitol*



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