



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
January 8, 1990

A heavy rain on New Year's Eve finally melted the snow that has covered the Zoo since early December. Despite the cold spell, occasional sunny days allowed the Zoo's horticultural division to proceed with landscaping the recently completed upper half of Olmsted Walk, the main pedestrian thoroughfare. Shrubs and trees are heeled in as they arrive until ready for planting in the areas designated.

This major landscaping effort is an integral part of the Zoo's long-range goal of converting itself from a traditional zoological garden into a biopark, where visitors can see and learn about all of natural history, not just the traditional zoo animals. The plan has presented some interesting challenges.

The choice of plants, for example, has a direct effect on insects, and outside the invertebrate exhibit the staff has planted a selection of flower species that blossom throughout the growing season to attract the bees and butterflies which are identified on large wall posters. The plantings have been successful, both aesthetically and educationally.

Both above components are important in selecting the proper mix of broad-leafed and coniferous trees. The principal shade trees along the walk are red, willow, burr and white oaks, white ash, hickory, linden and maple of various species, all of which are native and grow well here. Japanese sophora is a popular exotic because of its rapid growth and voluminous yellow blossoms in August, when few other trees bloom. In December, when its hanging seed pods ripen, flocks of starlings so voraciously cover the trees that in less than a fortnight no fruit is left uneaten.

The landscaping of Olmsted Walk has encouraged planting of rare American trees such as Frankliniana, now extinct in the wild, along with such beautiful conifers as the true cedars from the Mediterranean mountains and the beautiful long-needled Himalayan pine.



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Off the main path will be gardens with plants and shrubs used as food and medicine by other cultures, such as American Indians and African Americans. All of us still have much to learn about the taste and health efficacy of plants.

The plantings should be near completion by the time of the Advisory Council's May meeting when you can see for yourself the results of all the muddy work this winter. I want to thank publicly those who responded to my appeal for the Zoo in my last letter and wish all of you a Happy New Year.