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## Rare Beauty

Victorian Grandeur in Bloom at Rawlings Conservatory

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CINDY KALINOSKI



If you've been to the Baltimore Zoo, you've likely passed a thousand delights unaware. Called "Baltimore's Victorian Glass Palace in the Park," the Howard Peter Rawlings

Conservatory and Botanic Gardens lies within Druid Hill Park. Its soaring antique greenhouses were first open to the public in 1888. This landmark is one of the few surviving Victorian conservatories in the world. At five stories tall, it houses everything from towering palms to nickel-sized orchids.

It's small enough for a morning walk-through but vibrant enough to get you through our mostly brown-and-gray winters. But don't wait till then. Rawling's Spring Flower Show draws up to 5,000 admirers, with masses of blooming bulbs, azaleas and more. Every year the conservatory attracts almost 30,000 visitors, and for good reason. No matter which season you meander its plantscapes, you'll see something new.



## **Tropics and Desert: Closer than You Think**

Just a short drive south on I-83, you'll find a vanilla tree, a coffee tree, an olive tree and a prickly pear cactus. Not to mention 65 newly donated, rarely seen orchids. In fact, Rawlings owns so many orchid specimens they're rotated through the glass house annex only as they bloom.

"We probably have ten times the number of orchids you see at any one time," explains Melissa Grim, chief horticulturist with the city of Baltimore. One of her favorite collections at Rawlings Conservatory is the succulents. "But if you're in the under-five set," she says, "our biggest draw is our fish." Kids can buy food to feed these colorful beauties or hunt for the turtle or the frog, who hides a lot. Mango the resident cat can be harder to find, but he's arguably cuter.

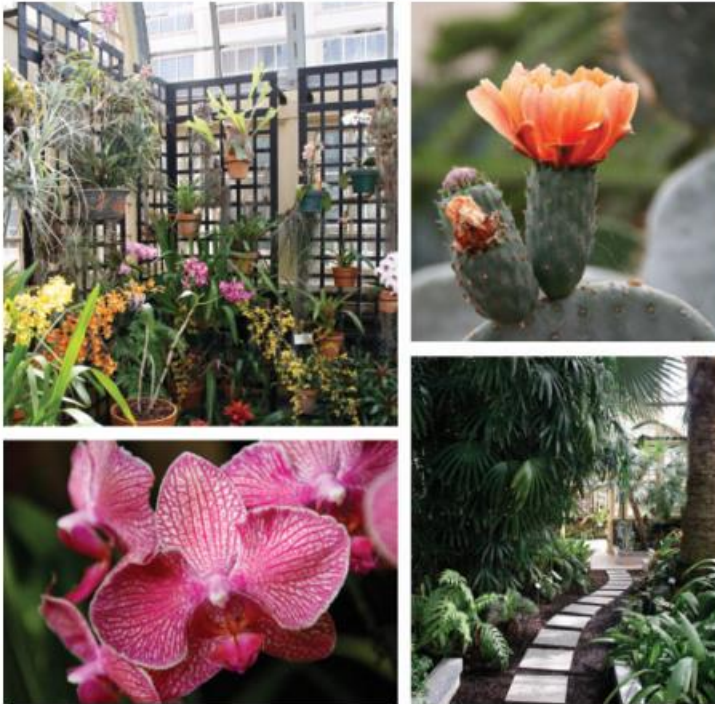
Easier to catch up with is Kate Blom, conservatory supervisor, who helped plant 1,123 bulbs for the 2016 Spring Flower Show. She declined to divulge the show's theme but said, "It's going to be really cool." Favorite bulbs for the upcoming event are the stunning "Daydream" tulip cultivar (butter yellow to apricot), the star-shaped "Trepolo" butterfly daffodil and a tulip called "Carousel," with fringes and crimson feathering.

## **Take a Trip Around the World**

Year-round, five indoor gardens are featured, plus an outdoor display garden. Inside the Mediterranean House, plants hail from as far away as Chile, Australia and South Africa. In the humid Tropical House (great for your complexion), banana and guava trees thrive alongside flamboyant ginger plants.

Over in the Desert House, Century plants, which grow only when it rains, persevere. The Palm House contains fourteen species of palms, plus exotic blooms like the lobster claw heliconia. The Orchid Room offers a 360-degree circle of splendor. Here specimens from the recent Kirkegaard 152-plant collection reign: A vanda at least 40 years old; *Cynoches* Jean E. Monnier (a maroon spotted wonder); the endangered slipper orchid, *Paphiopedilum spicerianum*; and the orchid that fascinated Darwin, Madagascar's *Angraecum sesquipedale*.

Together, the conservatory represents a remarkable collection. "We call this a hidden gem," says Grim. Extensive renovation that reopened in 2004 put this rescued building back on the map. "Since 2011," she states, "we've doubled our attendance."



## **Connecting with Nature**

Peggy Stansbury, author of *Glass House of Dreams*, which showcases Rawlings, raised funds alongside other volunteers to restore the endangered landmark. “I like to say you can take a trip around the world there,” says Stansbury. “It serves as a living classroom in an urban setting. Walking into the original palm house is like walking into a rain forest.”

Blom says Rawlings offers children, specifically inner-city children, a rare opportunity: “It helps them make a connection, because a lot of kids have bananas and think they grow on the shelves of Giant. But as they look up into the trees, it’s like a revelation. It plants seeds of stewardship and responsibility, and they begin to learn how dependent we are on plants.” Blom’s goal is to get every second grader in Baltimore there to make that connection.

Workshops for kids and adults are fun, and you can rent the facility; just picture a wedding here. Program it into your GPS to check out the farmers’ markets and the “world-renowned sprinkler,” a themed holiday poinsettia display and spring flower show, various concerts, and Plants & People Sundays. Whenever you go, you’ll discover something new. Up till now staff member James Blake has called it the best kept secret in Baltimore. Let’s make that just another piece of its history.