

April 10, 2008

Dear Members and Friends,

It is late March as I begin writing this newsletter. The winter has been unusually cold and snowy, and I am sure that you, as well as we, are very eager to get out on the land, even more than usual.

The hard winter has kept me inside more than I would like. It has given me time to think about the direction of the Arboretum and the purposes it needs to serve. Here is a summary of a few thoughts:

The Arboretum should continue to be principally a place of woody plants, steering clear of large, heavily cultivated display gardens. Extensive prairie areas are a major feature of the Arboretum and must be maintained and even perhaps extended. These natural areas give the Arboretum much of its distinctive feel.

The Arboretum will not attempt to become a large scale tourist attraction, but be a place for individuals and small groups. We do not think of the Arboretum as a mass experience.

The underlying feeling here is a love of the natural world and our belief that the “quality of our lives depends on the health of our global environment. Everything we do affects the environment. We all are responsible for protecting it.”

These two bedrock principals: what the Arboretum should be and how we must view the natural world are intertwined and will, we believe, continue to guide us, long after some of us are gone.

WHAT IS GOING ON

Building: We are approaching the stage of working drawings for an approximate 1,500 square foot addition to our building. A larger class room and expanded library space are very important elements here. There will also be a redesign of traffic flow to separate visitors, their cars and busses, from Arboretum vehicles, trailers and heavy equipment. This construction will probably be completed next year.

Pruning: Andy Schmitz is just ending the yearly pruning of many of our trees. This is an art as well as a science. He is a master. If you have questions, ask him about the pruning of your trees.

At the heart of pruning young trees is the decision as to where the lowest branches should be. The lowest branches are called scaffold branches. These many decisions make quite a difference in the appearance over time of our trees and therefore of the Arboretum.

Two New Species: I will mention two small groupings of new species. They are of great interest. One is False Cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera'). This small, slow growing evergreen is rarely grown in the midwest. The other is Striped Maple, also called Moosewood (*Acer pensylvanicum*). It is a small maple of high elevation and cold climates, not often found here. We will evaluate these two species for suitability for central Iowa.

Maps and Signage: Kay Meyer is just finishing our first complete pocket guide map of the Arboretum, with common names showing locations of all trees and shrubs. The maps will be found at the information kiosk for your individual use.

You will also see signage for our tall grass prairies, identifying grasses and prairie flowers. Also, Andy is now finishing, for the first time, signage for trees and shrubs we feel have characteristics which the homeowner may wish to consider as he landscapes his property. These trees and shrubs will have a larger decal in the shape of a house. More information about these species will be found in the information kiosk.

Evaluation Area: We are establishing, for the first time, an area to be found at the southeast side of the Arboretum (the Stine ground) for the planting and assessment of the growing habits of certain woody species. We are now considering so many new woody plants that we need space to see how they do before a determination can be made about placing them in the permanent collection. You may find this interesting to visit.

Osage-orange Collection: As reported in the fall newsletter, we are assembling a very large Osage-orange collection, one of the largest in the country for public display. This February, Andy Schmitz received several hundred cuttings from the John Pair Horticultural Center, Haysville, Kansas, from fourteen trees with desirable characteristics. Cuttings were also taken from trees at the Iowa Arboretum in Madrid. The cuttings were placed in trays with heated soil and have started to root. We soon will have little trees to pot up. Over the next several years we will place these noteworthy Osage-orange trees in our collection for you to observe. Some, we are sure, will be very handsome trees.

Membership: Our membership renewals are coming in. We will not disappoint. On Saturday, September 20th of this year, our third membership gathering will bring to us Dr. George Ware, of the Morton Arboretum, Lisle, Illinois (Chicago area). More than anyone else in our country, George has led the research and evaluation of new elm species to supplement our American elm. I am thrilled to have him speak to us. He is a tree man with an outstanding world reputation. More on this later.

Saturday, August 23rd, we will have a musical event, our first. It will be in the pavilion. An excellent string quartet will perform for 50 minutes to one hour. The classical program has not been set but will be announced. Please join us. You will receive further notification. I have no idea if this will become an annual event. We will get some experience and see. The general public will also be invited.

Workshops: For the first time, Kay Meyer is offering a series of workshops to help educators and others organize and lead children in nature exploration trips. We see this sort of initiative as at the heart of our educational mission.

New Board Member: Bob Rennebohm, long-time owner and operator of Heard Gardens in Des Moines was elected to our board at its April 4th meeting. Bob brings to the board a perspective which we have lacked. He is our first board member who has made his living running a commercial nursery. This background gives Bob a point of view as to priorities which we have not had. His election does not mean a change of direction for the Arboretum, but his presence will sensitize us and make us better.

Dallas County Growth: It was recently reported that Dallas County, where we are located, has both the largest percentage and numerical population growth in Iowa. Most of this growth is moving west from Des Moines directly toward the Arboretum. This means many things to us, but most of all, it gives new urgency to our mission of maintaining the Arboretum as a place of quiet enjoyment, and protecting it as a sanctuary in the midst of growing urbanization.

Increased people pressure will change our neighborhood over time. We must maintain, and if possible, extend what we have.

Classes: I enclose a list of our forthcoming classes, mostly out-of-doors. I hope you find something of interest. Each year it changes somewhat. Please take a look.

Thank you for all you do for us.

Sincerely,

Buz Brenton