Published on *United States Botanic Garden* (http://usbg.gov)

Brief History of the U.S. Botanic Garden

The United States Botanic Garden is rooted in the nation's heritage. During the late 18th century, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison shared the dream of a national botanic garden and were instrumental in establishing one on the National Mall in 1820.

The institution actually traces its beginning to 1816, when the constitution of the Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences in Washington, D.C., proposed the creation of a botanic garden to collect, grow and distribute plants of this and other countries that might contribute to the welfare of the American people. The Institute's garden was established by Congress in 1820 to the west of the Capitol Grounds, from First Street to Third Street between Pennsylvania and Maryland Avenues. This facility functioned until shortly after the organization stopped holding meetings in 1837.

In 1842, the idea of a national botanic garden was reestablished when the United States Exploring Expedition to the South Seas (the Wilkes Expedition) brought a collection of living plants from around the globe to Washington, D.C. Initially placed in a specially constructed greenhouse behind the Old Patent Office Building, the plants were moved in late 1850 into a new structure on the site previously occupied by the Columbian Institute's garden.

In continuous operation and open to the public since 1850, the Botanic Garden moved to its present location in 1933, a complex located along the north and south sides of Independence Avenue bordered by First Street and Third Streets, SW. The Garden includes the Conservatory, which was renovated from 1997-2001; the National Garden, which opened in 2006; and Bartholdi Park, which was created in 1932. A plant 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 maintenance shops.

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 through 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.

The U.S. Botanic Garden's First Conservatory This 1858 photograph shows the Conservatory constructed eight years earlier. The accompanying grounds occupied 10 acres extending from First Street to Third Street between Pennsylvania and Maryland Avenues SW. *Architect of the Capitol*

The 300-foot-long Main Conservatory, begun in 1867, consisted of a central dome and two wings. This photograph also shows where the Bartholdi Fountain stood from 1877 until 1927. *Architect of the Capitol*

This undated photograph shows the central dome of the old Main Conservatory in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. *Architect of the Capitol*

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