



For 100 years,
St. Paul's glasshouse
has offered warmth,
humidity and plants
to winter-weary
Minnesotans.

Winter Respite

Story and photos
by Mary Lahr Schier



A tiny fern about to unfurl



The Fern Room offers a warm, green entrance to the conservatory.

The impulse to escape sneaks into my bones about the third week in January. The seed catalogs have arrived and been examined, but I know it will be months yet before seeds can be started under lights or outside. Florida is a tempting idea but not practical or affordable many winters. Instead, I pick a subzero day (for maximum effect) and drive to Como Park, the urban pleasure ground created in the mid-1800s by St. Paul's elite citizens. Deep in the park lies the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, an old-style glasshouse filled with ferns, palms, flowering plants and humidity—blessed, moist air, the antidote to winter despair.

Inside the conservatory, in what's called the Fern Room, I sit on a bench and wait for the fog to evaporate from my glasses. It's usually quiet there and I can listen to the drips of water down a bank of stones. A waterfall adds to the rhythm of the room; giant ferns form a canopy, another layer between the cold, the glass and me. Ferns are primitive plants—"living fossils," according to the conservatory website—and this room usually feels the most basic and restorative. I take a deep breath.

St. Paul's Glass Temple

In November 2015, the conservatory will celebrate its 100th anniversary. It's one of the few surviving old-style glasshouses, built in the late 19th and early 20th century. Como's conservatory was the vision of Frederick Nussbaumer, who rose from gardener to superintendent of St. Paul parks and held the position for more than 25 years. A native of Germany and one-time gardener at Kew Gardens in London, Nussbaumer loved elaborate floral displays. These big shows "pay for parks," he noted once, because they draw crowds of people to the park to admire the splendor. To create those displays in a brutal northern climate, however, you need greenhouses—and lots of them.

Amaryllis, lilies and rhododendrons brighten the Sunken Garden in winter.



Even on the dreariest
of winter days,
the conservatory is filled
with children and adults,
enjoying the plants
and the warmth.



Statues and water features speak to the conservatory's Victorian past.



Cyclamen flowers line the walking path.

At this time, cities such as San Francisco, Chicago and New York had added conservatories to their parks, glass temples for plant lovers and symbols that the cities were prosperous and cosmopolitan. In 1913, St. Paul had nine utilitarian greenhouses at Como Park, most of them in bad shape. Nussbaumer saw an opportunity and tucked his request for a 60,000-square-foot conservatory into a city bond issue for park improvements. It passed and the conservatory was built from a prefabricated kit, a classic dome and wings design, with the metal, wood and glass parts arriving in St. Paul by train. It opened Nov. 7, 1915. [For a complete history, read *Jewel of Como: The Marjorie McNeely Conservatory* by Leigh Rathke and Bonnie Blodgett (Afton Historical Press, 2008)].

Circling the Dome

I follow the same path each time I visit the conservatory, almost like a walking meditation. After the Fern Room, I veer to the right, walking one-quarter of the way around the Palm Dome and into

the Sunken Garden room. Often, my visits coincide with the Winter Flower Show. While the Fern Room is all green, the Sunken Garden almost blinds you with color: bright pink azaleas, amaryllis as red as an autumn maple, 'Stargazer' lilies, cyclamen larger than you could ever grow at home. The garden's color is tempered by its formal design—a row of evergreens stands sentinel around the edges of the space—and the classic water feature that runs through its center. Overhead, the glass panels curve and come to a point, adding a layer of texture and light.

After taking a turn around the Sunken Garden, I'm back in the Palm Dome, walking through its green paths, examining the tropical plants. Then on to the North Garden, which houses the conservatory's collection of useful plants—bananas, Calamondin oranges, vanilla vines and a fig tree that is believed to have been planted in the conservatory in 1915. There's always something fascinating to scrutinize. One year, a hemp tree was in bloom during my visit, the flower resembling an electrical connection wire.



Bloom of Manila hemp (*Musa textilis*)



Moth orchid (*Phalaenopsis*)



Dozens of lilies bloom in January at the conservatory.

Weathering the Storms

The first 100 years at the conservatory have not been easy. During the Depression, parts of it fell into disrepair and had to be closed. Wooden pieces of the original structure needed replacing over time. In 1962, golf-ball-sized hail fell on the conservatory, sending park visitors who had taken refuge from the storm there scurrying for safer cover as glass shards rained down. By the 1970s, the conservatory, like other old glasshouses, was struggling.

But plant lovers have always come to its rescue. After the conservatory was named to the National Registry of Historic Places in 1974, many garden groups, including MSHS, spent much of the 1980s finding the money to renovate the conservatory. In the 1990s, the conservatory and Como Zoo merged into a single unit. Plans for a new visitor center attached to the conservatory were drawn up and, with the help of a \$7 million gift from the estate of St. Paul native Marjorie McNeely, more restorations were completed. Today, the conservatory is a busy place, hosting

flower shows, orchid shows, musical performances, teas and family events. Even on the dreariest of winter days, the days when I am circling the dome with my camera, it's filled with children and adults, enjoying the plants and the warmth.

Endurance

By the time, I've walked through the North Garden and circled the Palm Dome, my mind and body are relaxed. Often, there's another display to check out. One year, I happened upon the orchid show; another time it was a display of precise and perfect bonsai. One tree had a particularly beautiful shape and as I paused to photograph it, I noticed how sturdy it looked with the glass wall of the conservatory holding the snow outside at bay. In the protective embrace of the glasshouse, it would persevere despite the cold. □□

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