

# University of Wisconsin Arboretum

*Madison*

Establishing an arboretum can be a complicated and demanding undertaking. The needed interplay of skills and understandings, expertise and common sense, personality and perseverance is as rare as some of the vanishing species and plant communities an arboretum is formed to protect.

The names of the gardens, prairies, drives, woods and individual trees in the University of Wisconsin Arboretum in Madison are a litany of the people who made it happen. From the first mention in 1909 by landscape architect John Nolan, recently arrived from Massachusetts, and the first specific proposal placed before the Board of Regents by Michael B. Ol-

brich in the mid-1920s, to the present day, numerous practical dreamers have overcome incredible obstacles to ensure that Wisconsinites enjoy a delightfully restorative and valuable resource which will be preserved for future generations.

Well before Nolan and Olbrich, Increase Lapham, the state's first scientist, foresaw the need for preserving such a natural community in 1853 when he wrote in "The Forest Trees of Wisconsin" that "It would seem to be peculiarly appropriate for our Universities and Colleges to secure upon the grounds by which they are surrounded, at least one good specimen of each tree and shrub that grows naturally in Wisconsin; and I will venture to predict that the University or College that shall first surround itself



*Jackson Oak at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum*

B-Wolfgang Hoffmann (1982)

Excerpted from ***Every Root an Anchor: Wisconsin's Famous and Historic Trees***  
by R. Bruce Allison  
(© 2005 Wisconsin Historical Society)

Permission is granted for downloading this work for personal, educational and other non-commercial purposes. All other uses are prohibited unless permission is granted by writing: Permissions, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 816 State Street, Madison, WI 53706-1482

Electronic copy of the entire book is available at  
<<http://dnr.wi.gov>><<http://dnr.wi.gov/>>

with such an 'Arboretum' will first secure the patronage and good opinion of the people, and will thus outstrip those institutions that show a lack of taste and refinement by omitting to plant trees."

Equally important to planting trees is the need to study living plant communities, their interactions and evolution.

Even after the idea of an Arboretum was well accepted, the acquisition of the land, over 30 or more years (it is still going on), and the raising of needed funds were hectic and fraught with setbacks. But the diverse terrain now comprising the 1,200 acres holds perhaps more potential scientific opportunity than careful planning could have accomplished. "No other experiment in the country contains the number of different plant communities as does the University of Wisconsin Arboretum," according to Nancy D. Sachse, author of *A Thousand Ages*.

Today a foot traveler through the Arboretum can revel in a variety of natural environments: diverse types of wetlands (too fragile for casual visitors), shrub, savanna, conifer swamp, boreal forest, grassland, prairie, deciduous forest, pine forest, horticultural areas and experimental plots. Birders and botanists, wildlife students and ecology buffs have here an outdoor laboratory, workshop and display area. In the spring, for instance, people come from all over the Midwest to see and breathe in the heavenly fragrance of blooming lilacs and flowering crab apple trees in the Longenecker Gardens, named for the man who was the executive director of the Arboretum from its founding in 1932 until his retirement in 1965.

But the Arboretum is also the domain of scientists and students. Dozens of experiments of all types are conducted, while opportunities for continuous observation, equally important to naturalists, are many. As one example, Noe Woods, named for the donors of the land, can answer some vital questions about the life of an oak forest: What will happen when the dominant oaks, now mature, begin to age and die? Will the oaks predominate through only one generation? What species of tree—red maple, young white oak, black cherry—might succeed them? Since no one has ever lived with an oak forest long enough to find out what becomes of it in the long run, the Ar-

boretum, protected from disturbance and available to succeeding generations of researchers, can help shed light on these questions.

One of the treasures of the Arboretum was the Jackson Oak, a great, spreading tree, typical of oaks grown in full-sun openings. It was a seedling about the time Madison was chosen as the state capital in 1837, when at least 500 Native Americans were still camped around the Four Lakes. According to the late University President E. B. Fred, writing in *A University Remembers*, the oak "resembles in character the man it is named after, Colonel Joseph W. Jackson, an Arboretum founder and dedicated and untiring crusader for Arboretum fund raising and land acquisition." Sadly, the Jackson Oak, whose gnarly arms raised above the Curtis Prairie became a symbol of the Arboretum, died in the late 1990s.

The Leopold Pines, a forest of red, white and jack pines planted during the late 1940s and early '50s are, of course, named for Aldo Leopold. This world authority on game management and ecology was a member of the first Arboretum Committee and gave unstintingly of his time, efforts and expertise in restoring and establishing the resource. To him, an arboretum meant "far more than a mere collection of trees," but rather "a sample of what Dane County looked like when our ancestors arrived here." Recently, Arboretum officials have been clear-cutting some of the crowded pines and planting red maple, red oak, aspen, paper birch and basswood to create more of the diversity typical of native pine forests.

The Gallistel Woods, honoring Albert Gallistel, a charter member and 20-year chairman of the Arboretum Committee, include several kinds of deciduous forest. The Wingra Woods include the Arboretum's most magnificent stands of oaks, its preponderance of red oaks distinguishing it from Noe Woods. On its north-facing slope, Arboretum developers have planted hemlock and yellow birch, sugar maple, basswood and beech, all species characteristic of northern mesic forests, which were, at the time of settlement, Wisconsin's largest single plant community.

Sources: William R. Jordan, II, Madison  
Jim Zimmerman, Madison