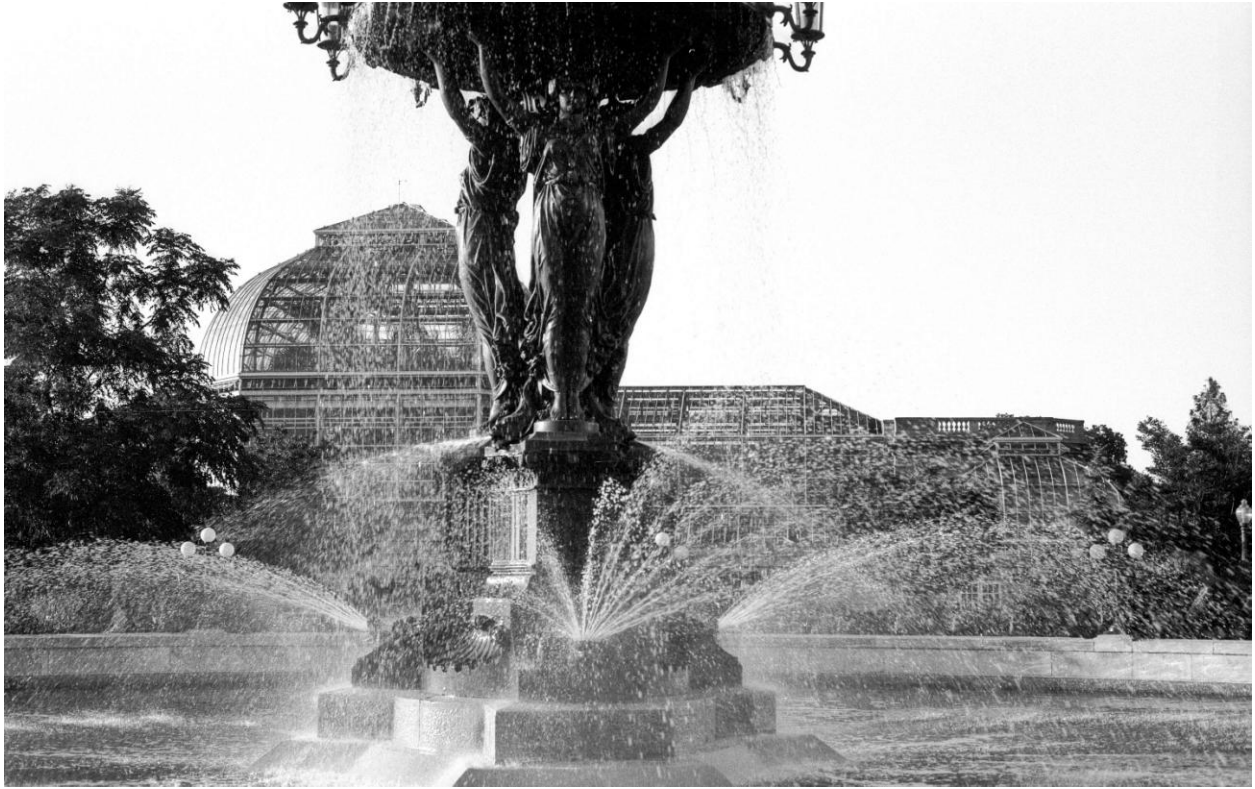


A Visit to the US Botanic Garden and its Special Holiday Exhibits

And the Traditions Behind the Christmas Tree

As It Is – December 24, 2013



The Bartholdi Fountain, across Independence Avenue from the US Botanic Garden (Photo by Steve Ember)

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is. I'm Steve Ember.

On our program today, we tell about beautiful green things that are part of the winter holiday season.

We'll visit the United States Botanic Garden and its special seasonal exhibits...

Then we'll learn how the ancient evergreen tree developed into the traditional Christmas tree.

But first, to America's plant museum...

Festive holiday exhibits bring many visitors to the US Botanic Garden

Each year, the United States Botanic Garden in Washington D.C. gets into the spirit of the winter holidays. Botanic Garden officials celebrate with an exhibit called "Season's Greenings."

Winter has arrived in Washington, and an icy wind is blowing. Many people are covered up in thick warm clothes. They wear heavy coats. Scarves hide their necks and gloves hide their hands. What can be seen of their faces look red as the visitors move from monument to monument, museum to museum.

Inside the US Botanic Garden Conservatory building it is very warm, almost tropical. The whole place smells of flowers and other growing plants. The Conservatory, an outdoor garden and the nearby Bartholdi Fountain make up America's plant museum. It is one of the oldest in North America.

And it happens to be a neighbor of ours here at the Voice of America.

Many things are in bloom in the greenhouse. Today, it is decorated with seasonal exhibits. Such exhibits have invited visitors in for almost ten years. One of the most interesting displays contains tiny versions of some of the most famous buildings in Washington.

There is the White House. And there is the Lincoln Memorial with the statue of President Lincoln inside. Turn around and there is a model of the U.S. Capitol building. The real building lies just a few hundred meters away.

Holly Shimizu is executive director of the Botanic Garden. Ms. Shimizu says the models are special because they are made of plant materials.

“You can notice that things like leaves are used and acorns from the oak trees and some of the wood from the willow tree. These are gathered in the woods by the artists that make these incredible structures.”

One model took more than 600 hours to complete.

“We also have one of the Smithsonian buildings and we have the Supreme Court. We have the Library of Congress...many of the buildings that a visitor to Washington, would see when they come to Washington, lining the National Mall.”

Model trains are another holiday favorite at the Botanic Garden. They run on more than 244 meters of track. The trains are in settings representing past world's fairs.

"That's the Eiffel Tower!"

It is a model of the Eiffel Tower from the 1889 Paris Fair and the Space Needle from the World's Fair in Seattle, Washington in 1962.

A visitor named Rachel Smalley says her favorite display is not a tiny building or a model train.

"I particularly like the indoor Christmas tree which is the largest in a public building in Washington. And of course the poinsettias are just beautiful with all the colors."

The US Congress established the Botanic Garden in 1820.

In 2006, the National Garden opened next to the greenhouse. And, across the street from the National Garden and the Conservatory there is still more beauty.



Outdoor gardens at the US Botanic Garden and the dome of the US Capitol (Photograph by Steve Ember)

Plants and garden designs are set around the historic Bartholdi Fountain, sculpted by Frederic Auguste Bartholdi. He was the French sculptor whose better known works in the United States include the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

It's As It Is from VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

The traditions behind the Christmas tree...

And now, we tell how the Christmas tree developed over the ages. Listen as Shirley Griffith explores the tradition of the evergreen.

Many Americans buy an evergreen tree for Christmas. They put the tree in their home and hang small lights and colorful objects on it. The evergreen is usually a pine or a fir tree. It remains green during the cold, dark months of winter in the northern part of the world. So, it is a sign of everlasting life.

The use of evergreens during winter holiday celebrations started in ancient times. Early Romans, for example, probably included evergreens with other plants during a celebration in honor of their god of agriculture.

The Christmas tree may have developed in part from a popular play performed hundreds of years ago in what is now Germany. Traditionally, the play was held on December twenty-fourth, the day before Christmas. The play was about the first people that God created -- Adam and Eve. People put apples on an evergreen to represent the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden.

By the year 1600, some Germans began bringing evergreen trees into their homes. They put fruit, nuts and sweets on the trees. They shared the food among family members and friends after the holiday season.

Some people say the German religious reformer Martin Luther was the first person to add lighted candles to a tree. They say he did this to show how wonderful the stars had appeared to him as he traveled one night.

In the early 1800's, German settlers in the state of Pennsylvania were the first to celebrate the holiday with Christmas trees in the United States.

The Christmas tree tradition spread to many parts of the world. Today, some form of Christmas tree is part of most Christmas celebrations. Some people put a star on top of their Christmas tree. It represents the star that led the three wise men to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem.

This is Shirley Griffith wishing you a joyous holiday season.

I can almost smell those pine trees here in the studio. You are listening to *As It Is*, from VOA Learning English.

And finally, the Washington, D.C. area is not what you would call warm in winter. Most flowers and bushes have stopped blooming. Many people in the capital grow a version of the popular cabbage plant for its winter beauty. Cabbages love cold weather. It is a favorite food in most countries with cold winters. The version called flowering cabbage shows bright colored leaves. The center leaves in cabbage flowers change color from green to white to purple as the temperature drops.

Cabbage flowers add a little welcome beauty and color as we wait for our cherry trees to bloom in the spring.

As It Is is a production of VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember. Thanks for joining us, and wherever you are listening and whatever holidays you celebrate, we wish you a very happy season!