



Zoo Edition Archives - Winter 2000

Excerpts from interview with WPZ Gardner Allen Howard:

WPZ: What is your job here at the zoo?

Allen: I am the gardener for the Tropical Rain Forest. I develop and maintain the landscapes in each of the exhibits.

WPZ: Have you always been interested in plants?

Allen: Yes. As a small child, I helped my parents work in the family garden, and when I was seven, I was given some garden space of my own. I picked out my own seeds (ageratums and marigolds), planted them without any supervision, and they grew! Later, I went to the nursery with my father to pick out my first tree, a peach tree. We took it home, and I planted it. It grew, and it produced peaches! It was amazing.

WPZ: What kind of training and education do you have?

Allen: I got my BA in Horticulture, and my MS in Botany. Before coming to work at Woodland Park Zoo, I worked for four years at the Fairchild Tropical Garden, in Miami. One of the projects I did while I was there was to travel to Panama, Malaysia and Borneo to collect wild plants to replace those that had been lost during hurricane Andrew. That was such a valuable experience, since it gave me the opportunity to see whole tropical ecosystems as they are in the wild. In Panama, I lived for three weeks with the local Indians, camping in the rain forest.

WPZ: What special challenges are there in planning landscapes for animals?

Allen: Some forest floor birds need open ground, so I look for plants that have most of their branches up higher. Some birds need lots of branches near the ground for perching. If it is an exhibit with destructive birds, I try to find plants with vertical branches that the birds can't destroy as easily. Sometimes I make a great match with plants and animals. I planted a palm tree in the ocelot exhibit, and the cats loved it! It was wonderful to see how entranced they were with this tree. They eat a lot of the palm fronds, so I rotate a new tree in every few months. Another time, I put a lot of branches in the back corner of the tanager exhibit, and the birds moved right into them. It nearly doubled their living space in the exhibit. Those are real successes.

WPZ: What are you working on right now?

Allen: Getting some larger plants well established in the exhibits. That will give the plantings a more natural, permanent look, with plants of different sizes.

WPZ: What advice would you give to students interested in a career in horticulture?

Allen: Start working in the field as soon as you can, get lots of practical experience, and meet as many people as you can that are working in the field. That way you can get an idea of all of the areas of specialization.

