

THE BOTANICAL GARDEN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA



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GREENHOUSE

THE BOTANICAL GARDEN OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA IS ABOVE ALL AN EDUCATIONAL CENTRE WHICH HAS NOW EXTENDED ITS ACTIVITIES AND OPENED ITS DOORS TO ALL SECTORS OF SOCIETY.

TONI MESTRE JOURNALIST AND RADIO BROADCASTER

Although the first Botanical Garden opened in Valencia dates from 1567 and during the Baroque and Enlightenment periods the professors of Herbs and Simples made use of several gardens for their classes, it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that the University of Valencia, in 1802, established the present Garden in the former Hort de Tra-

moyeres, in the carrer de Quart de Fora, beside the convent of Sant Sebastià. The first director was Vicenç Lorente, Professor of Herbs of the Faculty of Medicine, who arranged it according to the Linnaean system and established relations with other similar gardens, especially the one in Madrid. From its foundation, the Botanical Garden of Valencia went through a period of great

scientific activity interrupted by the first invasion by Napoleon's troops, in 1808, during which its director, who had taken part in the defence of the installations, was imprisoned and sentenced to death, though he was spared thanks to the mediation of the French botanist Léon Dufour. As a result of the second French invasion, from 1812 to 1813, the Garden was left in a deplora-

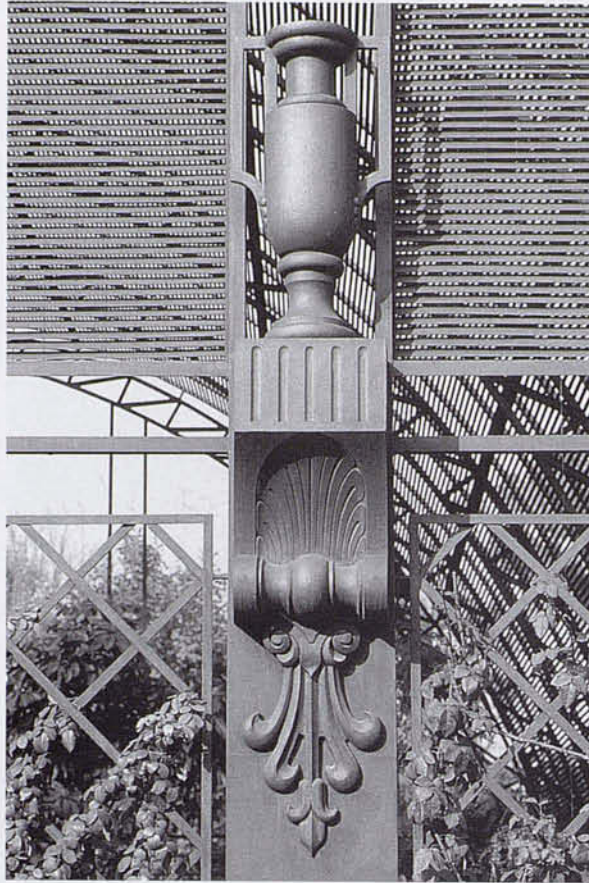


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ble state until 1829, when José Pizcueta was appointed director and began a period of intense scientific activity, enlarging the Garden and changing the layout of the Botanical School. He built a wooden greenhouse, a large shade house, acclimatization heaters and a greenhouse of iron and glass, still standing today, which represented an important step, not only for the Botanical Garden, but also for iron architecture and the development of new building materials in the Spanish State. During this period, up to 6,000 different species were grown in the Garden and a herbarium was installed. In 1843, during the reign of Isabella II, the Botanical Garden became part of the newly created Faculty of Sciences and the professors of botany ceased to be professional doctors. Following the death of Pizcueta in 1867, his place was taken by Rafael Cisneros, who improved the installations and

started publication of the annual catalogue –for exchange with other gardens of a similar type– which is still published today. In 1876, José Arévalo Baca became director, a post he held for twelve years, until he was replaced by Eduard Boscà Casesnoves. The second half of the nineteenth century saw an increase in the activities of the School of Botany and in the practical work and experiments on the plantations, in response to the growth of Valencian agriculture during this period, with the introduction of new crops, the acclimatization of species, etc. The importance of the Botanical Garden made it necessary to enlarge it to its present size. It was then that various heaters were built in what was known as the “pond” greenhouse. The last building work in the garden, the shade-house designed in the days of Arévalo Baca, dates from this period.

In 1913, Francesc Beltran Bigorra, an enthusiastic botanist, was appointed director. Nevertheless, the historical circumstances he had to contend with, such as the civil war of 1936-39, meant that both the Botanical Garden and the natural sciences in Valencia were deprived of the boost they needed. Some years later, in October 1957, the tragic flood of the River Túria devastated Valencia and almost destroyed the Botanical Garden itself, which lost the herbarium, plant collections, historical archives, etc. Nevertheless, Beltran managed to considerably increase the collections and established relations all over the world. To him we owe the first system for recording the Garden’s plants. Ignasi Docavo took over in 1962 and found that only the trees and some buildings remained standing. It was at this time that the library, the seedbeds and the laboratories were rebuilt, the structure



SHADE-HOUSE



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of the shade-house was restored, an aquarium and aviary were installed and, in general, the Garden was equipped with the minimum infrastructure to keep it operating. This was nevertheless a period of decline which did not come to an end until Manuel Costa's appointment in 1987 and the initiation of a programme of restoration and regeneration still in progress today.

The restoration of the installations has given the Botanical Garden of Valencia a new lease of life without destroying any of its long history. While botanical gardens originally appeared in Europe as centres for the cultivation of plants destined primarily to medicinal use and with educational and experimental ends, today they are first of all a rigorously scientific selection and exhibition of plant collections of different species, shown for their own sake and to offer as complete a picture as possible of plant diversity. At the same time,

they are full-scale research centres carrying out research programmes on flora and vegetation in their natural surroundings. They are also engaged in the work of safeguarding and preserving the heritage of rare, threatened or endangered plants.

Of course, the Botanical Garden of the University of Valencia is above all an educational centre which has now extended its traditional educational activities from the university world to more elementary levels, reaching out to all sectors of society. The arrangement of the Garden in flowerbeds goes back to the design of almost two hundred years ago. The first sixteen are called the School of Botany, definitely one of the most important parts of the garden. The species grown here are amongst the most representative of the main botanical groups. The species on show here are the ones with the highest educational value.

But this is only the beginning of the visit. There are several ponds and springs distributed around the Garden, where aquatic plants are exhibited, while in the very centre of the Garden, beside the administrative building, is the tropical greenhouse, the Garden's most important construction, an iron structure supporting 465 square metres of glass, built between 1860 and 1862. The shade-house, the work of the architect Artur Mèlida, was designed in 1897 and has undergone exhaustive restoration. It contains important collections of succulents and palms. One of the Botanical Garden's greatest assets and its chief attraction are the trees which cover almost the whole of the surface area. The Fagaceae are particularly well represented and we can find excellent specimens of *Zelkova crenata*, *Ginkgo Biloba*, *Chorisia speciosa* and *Carya olivaeformis*, this last probably the biggest tree in the whole Garden. ■