Stop 373 Adult Tour – Historical Overview, Cold House

There has always been a close connection at Smith College between the teaching of plant sciences and the use of the campus as a botanical garden. The first classroom and administration building were completed in 1875 on the site of the former Lyman and Dewey homesteads in the lush Connecticut Valley.

As enrollments grew during the 1880s, additional properties were acquired and new buildings constructed. The hiring of Frederick Law Olmsted to develop a more comprehensive landscape scheme resulted in an extensive set of plans that would enhance Smith College’s vision to provide a garden setting for academic life. Olmsted’s planting lists specified an extraordinary diversity of trees, shrubs, herbs, marsh and aquatic plants. By 1894, a small greenhouse with a potting shed was built with hopes that it could be enlarged one day to house a ‘collection of exotic plants.’ Through the generosity of Edward Lyman the following year, construction began on a new conservatory.

Plants for the Botanic Garden were either purchased from commercial sources or acquired as gifts and exchanges from other institutions here in the U.S. Living plants or seeds were also sent from gardens abroad. In repayment, the Botanic Garden initiated a policy in 1895 that continues to this day. Every year, public gardens and select greenhouses are sent lists of the gardens’ seeds that are available simply by request.

Noted botanist and Smith professor William Ganong remarked in 1897, “History is made rapidly at Smith… Four years ago a part of its campus was a rough wilderness; that part is now a garden, scientific in plan, serviceable to education, and although new and unripe, not without promise of beauty.” In 1995, the Botanic Garden of Smith College celebrated the centennial anniversary of the construction of the Lyman Plant House and has more than lived up to its promise to nurture and enrich all who set foot here.