Stop 391 Adult Tour – Orangeries, Camellia Corridor

The first sweet fruiting orange was brought back from the Far East by Portuguese explorers in the 16th century. Oranges were collected as exotics, valued for both their fruit and fragrant blossoms. Their evergreen foliage also added to their ornamental use in the garden. The word ‘orangerie’ was first used in reference to gardens of orange trees that were grown outdoors. But over time, the term was applied to special buildings that were designed to overwinter the tender citrus plants. Citrus trees were often rolled into the orangerie for the cold months and then rolled back out into the garden for their season of growth. Having an orangerie became a status symbol for the rich and powerful. The orangerie at Versailles—measured 500 feet long, 42 feet wide, and 45 feet high! Even George Washington, had one at his home—Mount Vernon. But he called it a pinery, because it was built to grow pineapples, his favorite fruit.

During the 18th century, orangeries also served as places for banquets, theatrical productions and festivals. The building was used as an entertainment area when the potted citrus, palm or camellia trees were wheeled outdoors for the summer months. In the winter, guests would be taken for strolls through these often-ornate structures, admiring the plants and inhaling the perfume of tropical flowers.

By the middle of the 19th century, building materials became less expensive and more accessible. Today, growing plants under glass is no longer limited exclusively to the wealthy classes. New light and airy greenhouses have been developed that can be used as cozy links between home and garden.