

A SPECIAL SECTION: MUSEUMS

## A Garden With a Profusion of Ideas

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L. Albee/Longwood Gardens

**FRAGRANT TOUCH** Orchids adorn the entrance to the music room in Longwood's Conservatory Exhibition Hall, where a perfume exhibit is planned.

KENNETT SQUARE, Pa.



L. Ablee/Longwood Gardens

AT some stage, every cultural institution created by a single, powerful founder must learn how to evolve beyond its early roots. For [Longwood Gardens](#), a 1,077-acre display garden in the Brandywine Valley of southeastern Pennsylvania, that moment came when Paul B. Redman, the current director, assumed his post during its centennial celebration, in July 2006.

Longwood's board had lured Mr. Redman away from the Franklin Park Conservatory in Ohio, a down-at-the-heels institution that he returned to health. Longwood was in a sharply different position, with a devoted public, a generous endowment and the largest and most-visited conservatory in the United States.

### TEMPERATE LATITUDES

The grounds of Longwood include a conservatory where bananas can grow.

It was clear from the beginning that his very appointment signaled a mandate for change. As Mr. Redman himself said, during a recent interview in his office, “If I’d thought that this was a done deal with nothing else to do, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Longwood isn’t broken,” he said, yet the task at hand was “an incredible leadership challenge.”

“How do you take something that’s already great and make it better?” he asked. “It was about bringing Longwood into the 21st century.”

The solution that emerged involved a global museum consulting firm, hours of meetings and a series of master plans, many of which are still in progress. Slowly but surely, Longwood, less than an hour’s drive from Philadelphia, is figuring out how to earn international recognition as one of the great gardens of the world.

Longwood was founded by the business magnate Pierre S. du Pont, who bought the property in 1906 to prevent its late 18th-century Quaker arboretum from being razed.

Over the next 30 years, he transformed the grounds into a pastoral palace of wonders, with 325 acres of cultivated gardens, three major fountain gardens with 1,700 water jets and hundreds of colored lights among them, an indoor ballroom with one of the world’s largest pipe organs and an open-air theater that once presented performances by talents as disparate as Martha Graham and John Philip Sousa.



L.Albee/Longwood Gardens

Flowers and plants that are typically found in the balmy climate of the Mediterranean.

Du Pont designed almost all of this himself, from the fountains and conservatories to the underground heating system and boiler. He also laid the groundwork for Longwood’s future: by the time he died in 1954, it was being operated by a foundation with a public mission, which was supported by an endowment that received the bulk of his \$60 million estate.

Today, most of those early 20th-century wonders are still thriving — even the boiler and the endowment — as Mr. Redman pointed out on a recent tour through the grounds. Although the gardens and fountains were cloaked with snow, the four-acre conservatory was a lush, steamy, orchid-festooned paradise, filled with individual rooms dedicated to different climates and plant species, and fragrant with the scent of freesia, narcissus, hyacinth, grapefruit and Asiatic lilies.

But after Mr. Redman ducked through a leaf-covered door in the Cascade Garden — a 1992 addition, designed by the Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx — another side of Longwood was revealed. Along with the dozens of plant production greenhouses, nurseries and composting facilities one might expect, the back-of-house areas were full of horticulturalists working on research and development projects, including a plan to

develop both ever-blooming and cold-hardy camellias and a study of the precise conditions required to grow giant Victoria water platters indoors.

Over the years, Longwood has also made advances in environmentally safe pest management, land stewardship, irrigation and conservatory temperature control. Its exploration trips have introduced 130 plants to the United States market, and it has an educational wing, with internships, professional training, and a horticulture Ph.D. program run in conjunction with the [University of Delaware](#) at Wilmington.

Most of these activities were initiated by the three directors before Mr. Redman, to benefit the public by making Longwood a premier garden estate. Yet today, the larger public knows little about these behind-the-scenes achievements. And even within Longwood, there was an increasing sense of not being able to see the forest for the trees.

“From 1954 until recently,” Mr. Redman said, “we were still trying to interpret what du Pont wanted. Like many institutions, we were doing it on a year-to-year basis. It wasn’t bad, but we knew we could do it better if we had our own unified institutional vision for the future.”

So in early 2008, to help create that vision, he and the board hired Gail and Barry Lord, of Lord Cultural Resources, possibly the world’s oldest and largest cultural planning firm.

The Lords, based in Toronto, have nine international offices and have worked with more than 1,700 cultural institutions, including the Tate in London and the forthcoming museums on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi.



Richard Stamelman/Collection of Petar Forgan

**MESSAGE ON A BOTTLE**

A perfume bottle, Sylphide, by Lalique, will be part of the exhibit “Making Scents.”

“We wanted to work with them because they have a global perspective,” Mr. Redman said. “We may be located in southeastern Pennsylvania, but in today’s world what’s happening in France, South Africa and Australia impacts us, too.”

Since then, the Lords have visited frequently and conducted many studies. Ms. Lord and her New York-based team carried out the strategic planning: they spent 18 months canvassing and holding meetings with everyone who works there, from the board members (a third of whom are du Pont

descendants) to the entire staff, including volunteers, as well as the international horticulturalists and local leaders who have an interest in how things turn out.

Concurrently, Mr. Lord’s team produced a master facilities plan, now complete, to reshape Longwood’s gardens, buildings and energy sources over the next 40 years. Lord’s New York branch is now developing more detailed plans to help the institution tell its story. The entire planning and design process will take several more years.

The aim throughout, Ms. Lord explained, has been to find “the thread of meaning” that runs through all of Longwood’s activities. “It’s not enough to have beautiful, perfect flowers,” she said. “You have to ask, ‘What does it all mean? What does it add up to? What’s the core idea?’ ”

Although that is still being determined, one strategy is to make Longwood’s backstage activities more public. To that end, it has begun [publishing videos on YouTube](#), one of which documents annual efforts to grow a thousand-bloom chrysanthemum, and last month, for the first time, it contributed plants to the Philadelphia Flower Show.

Another tactic has been to prompt the staff to see Longwood as a museum, and for the gardeners to think more like curators, an approach that should be evident when Longwood opens its first full-scale show, “[Making Scents: The Art and Passion of Fragrance](#),” on April 10. Mr. Redman had the idea when Jim Harbage, who directs the research program, mentioned that scientists from a local fragrance laboratory had been visiting the gardens to perform headspace analysis — a process that allows a flower’s scent to be captured and synthesized to create perfume.

Initially, said the director of horticulture, Sharon Loving, her department had intended to handle the show as it might have done in the past, by growing a gorgeous crop of scented plants and putting up a few text panels.

But this time, largely at Ms. Lord’s instigation, she sought advice from the perfume scholar Richard Stamelman and an outside exhibition team, and fleshed out a more expansive show. “We’re introducing this curatorial voice,” Ms. Loving said, “and making sure we have a rich cultural experience for our guests. That’s something new for us.”

The show will now use Longwood’s conservatory and indoor music room to tell the full story of perfume, from the cultivation of scented plants to the way that scents are extracted or synthesized, blended and decoratively bottled to create it.

The display will also be interactive: in a music room adjoining the conservatory, visitors will be able to mix their own fragrances. Longwood is also introducing its own eau de parfum, Always in Bloom, a lily of the valley creation by the French perfumer Olivier Polge.

For Ms. Loving the planning process has been liberating. “Now, when we have meetings, everyone uses the same language and knows where we’re going,” she said. “Somehow that master plan frees up energy.”

Mr. Redman concurred. “If a strategic plan is done correctly it will outlive any single individual or personality,” he said. “The reality is that people like me will come and go, and when that time comes it’ll be clear what the vision for Longwood is.”