

UCD oak grove plans takes root

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by Sharon Stello, Enterprise staff writer

An interpretive trail, mural and cell phone audio tour are among improvements planned for the Shields Oak Grove at UC Davis, raising the value of the nationally significant grove for visitors and researchers, thanks to a new grant.

The Arboretum will receive \$149,967 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services for the two-year project starting in November.

The project will help fulfill the late John Tucker's vision for the collection. Tucker, a lifelong oak scholar and former Arboretum director, established a \$250,000 endowment in 2001 to fund the grove's maintenance and develop educational programs. Interest from the endowment has been used to leverage conservation grants for irrigation and assessment of each oak's health, laying the foundation for making the grove a visitor-friendly resource.

"This is something he really hoped for, for the collection," said Emily Griswold, the Arboretum's assistant director of horticulture. "I don't think we could have gotten to this point without his support."

Tucker died last month at age 92. The public is invited to a memorial service at 10 a.m. Saturday at the University Club at UCD.

Tucker helped make Shields Grove one of the best, with 318 oak trees representing 89 taxa from the United States, Mexico, Europe and Asia. The grove contains the greatest taxonomic diversity of any known oak collection and includes 17 oak varieties not found in any other collection. In October, UCD's oak grove was one of 15 selected for membership in the North American Plant Collections Consortium.

Griswold will manage the upcoming grant-funded project. She has wanted to develop an interpretive trail in the oak grove for 10 years.

"I'm thrilled," Griswold said. "I feel like we've been talking about this forever."

"Back in 1998, I started working on a collection analysis of the oak grove and one of the things I realized then was it was this amazing resource but few people visit it because it's not particularly accessible."

'More inviting'

After talking with many current and former staffers, Griswold's 1999 report recommended an interpretive trail among many goals for the oak grove.

"I think having a trail is going to make that area a lot more inviting for people," Griswold said.

The signs and cell phone tour will tell stories about the oaks "to bring (the grove) to life in a new way," she said.

A new ceramic mosaic mural is the first change visitors will notice. It will be installed by December on a public restroom's exterior wall facing the oak grove. The Arboretum restroom already is decorated with murals on two other walls.

The mural, featuring oak woodland flora and fauna, will be created this fall by UCD students in the Art/Science Fusion Program. Local schoolchildren, Arboretum volunteers and community members also will have the chance to create pieces for the mural with help from a faculty scientist and professional ceramic artist.

An interpretive trail will be constructed during the project's first year, likely in summer 2009. The Oak Discovery Trail will feature paths, benches, plant labels and interpretive signage to educate

visitors about oak biology and ecology, the importance of oaks in human history and culture, their significance in mythology and lore, and the challenges facing oak populations worldwide, including climate change, loss of habitat to development and sudden oak death, a fungal disease killing millions of oaks in coastal California.

Eventually, Arboretum directors hope to create many trails through the grove. This first trail is planned for the grassy lawn area not affected by the herons and egrets that roost in many of the trees during spring and summer. About half of the grove is closed to the public from March to September due to the breeding birds. But this first trail will be accessible year-round, Griswold said.

Signs for the trail will take longer to develop, likely to be installed in spring or fall 2010. They will be created using the Arboretum's nationally recognized exhibit development strategy. Teams will test mockup signs with visitors and refine them until they attract and hold visitors' attention and effectively convey the desired educational messages.

Just call in

A cell phone audio tour also will be produced, likely in 2010. Signs will direct visitors to phone in, enter the number of the stop and listen to an audio narrative.

"This is a growing trend in science museums, particularly outdoor museums," Griswold said.

It makes sense because so many people have cell phones these days, she said. It's more convenient than renting out devices for self-guided audio tours. And visitors strolling through the grove can spontaneously decide to call for more information.

Griswold said she sees two types of people currently using the oak grove. There are oak specialists who can already identify the oaks on their own and are passionate about these trees. Then, there are individuals and families who use it as a park for picnicking or walking the dog. They admire the grove's beauty, but don't know much about the oaks. Others are afraid to venture too far into the grove for fear of getting lost. The grove is about 11 acres, about twice the size of Central Park in downtown Davis.

Griswold hopes the planned trail will help visitors better connect to the grove. Educational programs will be offered too. Arboretum docents will be trained to give free guided tours of the oak grove on weekends at least once per quarter.

Researchers working on oaks will participate in the Arboretum's Science Cafe, which is still in the planning stages. The series will bring UCD experts to the Arboretum for informal talks and conversations with the public about current topics of interest.

Family Oak Day

The Arboretum also plans to host a Family Oak Day, a community celebration of oaks, which will feature guided tours; presentations by UCD faculty and students, local environmental organizations and native California cultural interpreters; hands-on activities for families; and the unveiling of the ceramic mosaic mural.

To help researchers, part of the grant will go to enhancing the oak collection's documentation through herbarium specimens and photographs.

Staff at the UCD Center for Plant Diversity herbarium and the U.S. National Arboretum herbarium will work with UCD Arboretum staff to prepare vouchered herbarium specimens of the 150 kinds of oaks in Shields Grove. Those specimens will become part of the national herbarium. And procedural guidelines will be developed to produce vouchered specimens for the entire NAPCC oak collection.

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