

## Howard Peters Rawlings Conservatory and Botanic Gardens

by Lynn Brinkley

**A** HISTORIC LANDMARK for over 125 years, the Howard Peters Rawlings Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland, is one of the oldest glass conservatories in the United States. It opened in 1888 after the construction of the five-story Palm House was completed. An Orchid Room was added on shortly afterwards. The conservatory, surrounded by sweeping lawns, became the newest feature of Baltimore's developing 745-acre Druid Hill Park, established in 1860 at the height of the grand city park era.



The Victorian-era Conservatory is the focal point of the Howard Peters Rawlings Conservatory and Botanic Gardens in Baltimore, Maryland.

Over the next century, the Victorian-style building, originally named Druid Hill Park Conservatory, became home to an impressive collection of plants from all over the warmer regions of the world. With its emphasis on the tropics and orchids, the conservatory has long offered a welcome respite from the drab cityscape, especially in winter.

It nearly went the way of other vanished Victorian glasshouses in the late 1990s, however, when it was badly in need of renovation. But thanks in large part to the advocacy of long-serving Maryland politician Howard Peters Rawlings and other backers, the conservatory was salvaged from disrepair and three additional green-

houses plus two enclosed pavilions were added. This enabled the facility to expand its plant collections to include species from Mediterranean, tropical, and desert environments. In appreciation of Rawlings's significant role in the aging conservatory's preservation, in 2004 the facility was renamed in his honor.

### TRADITIONAL DISPLAYS FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

Rawlings Conservatory today offers visitors a variety of botanical experiences. In the original **Palm House**, several towering specimens nearly touch the domed glass roof. Scores of shorter palms fill in around these giants, accented by crotons and colorful flowering plants.

Immediately behind the Palm House is the adjoining **Orchid Room** with a similar glass framework but not quite as high a ceiling. Staff rotate the orchids on display as they come into bloom to provide a continuous show of color. The conservatory's collection was enriched in 2015 with 152 additions from the widow of Maryland Orchid Society member Leslie Kirkegaard. The Orchid Room itself was renovated in spring of 2016, thanks to a donation from the estate of a Baltimore philanthropist and gardener, Sidney Silber.

### STROLLING THROUGH WARMER CLIMES

The revitalized Orchid Room connects to three newer hothouses constructed in the



This *Phalaenopsis* hybrid is among many blooming orchids on display in the Orchid Room.

early 2000s. The first is the **Mediterranean House**, which is often permeated by refreshing scents from the citrus collection in bloom and also includes a variety of flowering shrubs and trees such as oleander (*Nerium oleander*) and crimson bottlebrush (*Callistemon citrinus*). Simple, blue-tiled fountains brighten the backdrop of ecru tiles and olive-green foliage.

Next through the connecting doors is the lush **Tropical House**, home to a veritable jungle of plants with flamboyant flowers and unusual foliage such as dwarf bananas, papayas, red passion flowers, blue sky vines (*Thunbergia grandiflora*), and walking irises (*Neomarica gracilis*). On one side of the serpentine pathway, moisture-loving species such as cannas and

fire flag (*Thalia geniculata*) nestle closely around a koi pond, which is a particular favorite for young visitors.

Finally, the dry warmth of the **Desert House** supports a diverse collection of plants from the world's arid regions. Familiar plants such as aloes, agaves, and cactus cacti are represented by enormous specimens. Their fellow water conservationists of smaller size include Madagascar palm (*Pachypodium lamerei*), slipper plants (*Pedilanthus macrocarpus*), and zebra starfish flowers (*Stapelia hirsuta*). Painted Desert boulders with their rippled rust red-orange patterns perfectly complement the plants.

#### ADDITIONAL OFFERINGS

After wandering through the desert, visi-



A variety of warm-climate plants surround this sitting area in the Mediterranean House.

### Additional Information

#### Howard Peters Rawlings Conservatory and Botanic Gardens

3100 Swann Dr., Baltimore, MD 21217  
(410) 396-0008.

[www.rawlingsconservatory.org](http://www.rawlingsconservatory.org).

- Hours: Open year-round, Wednesday through Sunday, 10 a.m.–4 p.m.
- Admission: No entry fee, but a \$5 per person donation is encouraged.

Other nearby sites to explore:

**Baltimore Museum of Art, Sculpture Garden**,  
<https://artbma.org/collections/sculpture.garden.html>.

**Ladew Topiary Gardens**,  
[www.ladewgardens.com](http://www.ladewgardens.com).

**Sherwood Gardens**,  
<http://guilfordassociation.org/sherwood>.

tors may exit through the south pavilion hall into the outdoor garden featuring several beds of colorful annuals and perennials. At the center of this garden is an enormous bronze-coated granite sundial that was presented to the City of Baltimore in the 1890s. Its many facets keep the solar time of Baltimore, Rio de Janeiro, Tokyo, London, and other international cities.

In addition to its varied plant collection, Rawlings Conservatory offers a range of programs for the public. Workshops, seasonal celebrations, and annual displays, such as the elaborate Spring Bulb Show each April, are regularly held in its indoor pavilions. Moreover, each Sunday afternoon of the month the conservatory hosts a themed session of its “Plants & People” program. Participants may visit an “Ask a Master Gardener” clinic, enjoy education programming for elementary age children, or receive a free guided tour when the month has a fifth Sunday.

Whenever you visit Rawlings Conservatory in Druid Hill Park, it will tantalize all your senses while immersing you in the charms of the Victorian era. The city park is itself a historic treasure, so give yourself time to explore its many features, too.

*Lynn Brinkley is an editorial intern with The American Gardener.*