Rare and Endangered Species

In a quiet passageway between the Garden Court and Plant Exploration, two beds of plants face each other—on one side tropical plants, on the other cacti and succulents. What can they possibly have in common? Unfortunately, all of these different plants share a seemingly inevitable fate—extinction.

Under natural conditions, plants become extinct when they are so rare that reproductive success is threatened or they cannot survive a local catastrophe, such as a fire or ice storm. Over geological time, shifts in climate, cataclysmic geological events, and arrival of new species have caused extinction, especially among plants with small populations. Human activities—habitat destruction, over-harvesting, collection of rare species for commercial trade, and introduction of invasive non-native species—accelerate the natural processes.

The U.S. Botanic Garden is one of many botanic gardens worldwide that actively participate in the conservation of endangered species by maintaining live specimens in their collections, studying wild plants at risk, banking seeds of rare plants, and introducing rare plants to the horticultural trade. As one of 62 repositories for plants that have been seized by customs agents through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Botanic Garden accepts and cares for orchids and succulents.

(above)

Foxtail palm (*Wodyetia bifurcata*).

The Australian foxtail palm was thought to be extinct in the wild, but was rediscovered in 1979. It has gotten a new lease on life because of its popularity in the landscape trade.

(left)

CITES plants.

Endangered cacti are cared for at the Production Facility.

(opposite)

Golden barrel cactus (*Echinocactus grusonii*).

The golden barrel cactus has suffered habitat loss due to the building boom in the desert Southwest.