10 Years of Tropical Encounters
Come in from the Cold at Como

It’s cold outside, but it’s balmy and beautiful at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, one of Minnesota’s most beloved winter destinations. Don’t let a little snow keep you away from a full calendar of festive nights and family fun to keep the winter blues at bay. Here’s a look.

MUSIC UNDER GLASS

The Sunken Garden is the setting for eight Sunday nights of intimate concerts with some of the Twin Cities’ best indie artists, eclectic bands and singer/songwriters. Each of the free, featured concerts takes place from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., with a cash bar open for beer, wine, soda and light snacks.

1.17: The Sudden Lovelies
1.18: The Teague Aleyx Band
1.19: Xavier Matos
1.21: The Bad Companions
1.22: Rachel Ries & Co.
2.5: Sister Tree
2.19: The Bad Companions
2.26: Café Accordian Orchestra
3.5: Jelloslave

TROPICAL ENCOUNTERS TENTH ANNIVERSARY BASH

January 16, 9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m.

Como Friends supporters are invited to join us under the tropical canopy to celebrate 10 years of encounters with the fascinating and unusual flora and fauna that make up Como’s rainforest ecosystem. Must RSVP to comomembership@comofriends.org or 651.487.8229.
 Como News and Events
Winter 2017

LIL’ EXPLORERS
Como’s Education Team creates a fantastic landscape for free play and fun story times every Thursday from 10 a.m. to noon at Lil’ Explorers, an early childhood program designed specifically for preschoolers, parents and caregivers to learn together. Visit Como’s education website for a complete list of upcoming themes that teach Como’s littlest learners about the earth’s amazing animals and plants.

WINTER CARNIVAL ORCHID SHOW
January 28 and 29, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Marjorie McNeely Conservatory
Showy blooms and delicate arrangements delight the senses every year in this beloved St. Paul Winter Carnival Tradition. Nearly 5,000 visitors come to see the showcase orchids cared for by volunteers who helped us hand out more than 130,000 treats while raising more than $60,000 to benefit Como’s plants and animals thriving.

Become a Como Friends Member and Save
Don’t forget to use your Como Friends Membership card to save $5 per ticket to Bouquets and $1 per ticket to the Winter Carnival Orchid Show. And be sure to keep it in your wallet for other great discounts and benefits, including 10 percent off of tuition for any of Como’s family classes and summer camps, and 15 percent off every purchase at Garden Safari Gifts.

At the Como Friends Connector level, your membership even opens the door to free or discounted admission to more than 800 museums that are part of the North American Reciprocal Society, as well as the best orchids in the world. At the Como Friends Connector level, your membership even opens the door to free or discounted admission to more than 800 museums that are part of the North American Reciprocal Society, as well as the best orchids in the world.

#CUTETOFF cues up great day of giving: Give to the Max Day kicked off early at Como Zoo and the Minnesota Zoo, which engaged in a good natured “cute off,” sharing awe-inspiring pictures of recent zooborns on social media. Adorable baby pictures of Prince, the new giraffe born November 10, zebra baby Krump, and orangutan Kemala all helped generate excitement about Give to the Max Day, which raised $32,151 from 370 donors. Matched by a generous $25,000 challenge grant from Horton, Inc., the event raised a total of $57,151 to keep all of Como’s plants and animals thriving.

North Garden Q and A
“There’s no such thing as a bad plant,” says Margaret Yeakel-Twum, the lead horticulturist for the economic plant collection in the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s North Garden. “All plants are here for a reason, and humans have learned to put many of them to use in some amazing ways.” As she celebrates her 20th year at Como and gets set to retire this spring, we asked her to share her insider tips about one of Como’s hidden treasures.

1). What is an economic plant?
“Broadly defined, it’s any commercially important plant that’s been cultivated for human use,” she says, “from the nutmeg trees that spice up recipes all over the world, to the rubber tree plants prized for their water-resistant latex. “We also look for plants that help to tell stories about other cultures,” like the Ficus religiosa, sacred to many religious traditions of India, China and Indonesia. “This is the tree that the Buddha was said to be meditating under when he received enlightenment, so it’s very precious to some of our visitors,” says Yeakel-Twum, who sometimes finds the tree has been adorned with marigolds near Buddhist and Hindu holidays.

2). Where do you get your plants?
“Many plants in here have been grown from seed, and when we’re interested in bringing in a new plant, horticulturists get creative,” says Yeakel-Twum, who enjoys cultivating her professional contacts and Como garden volunteers to help her track down unusual or hard-to-find species. For instance, the climbing vanilla vines were sourced from the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, seeds for the garden’s cola tree were found in a local Nigerian festival, and the 20-year-old tamarind tree near the koi pond bench was grown from a seed saved from a dinner plate at a Thai restaurant. A world-traveler with a deep interest in cultural and medicinal plants, Yeakel-Twum has also added to the collection on her journeys, cultivating white pineapples with a deep interest in cultural and medicinal plants, Yeakel-Twum has also added to the collection on her journeys.

3). What does it take to pollinate plants indoors? In the case of the vanilla orchid, flowers must be hand-pollinated quickly, requiring Yeakel-Twum to take a 20-foot hydraulic lift to the high-climbing vines, where she uses a thin bamboo stick to press the flower’s pollinia (male) to the stigma (female). “You’ve really got just a four-hour window to get it right,” says Yeakel-Twum, who also came up with a creative way to pollinate the cacao trees, which depend on tropical midges. “Everyone has overripe bananas at home, so I brought those in and hung them in a mesh bag from the cacao tree to get fruit flies to do their thing.” resulting in the cocoa pods now visible on the trees.

4). How important is pruning?
“That’s our focus through the fall and early winter,” when she and other horticulturists cut back growth to bring more light into the North Garden during the darkest months of the year. Near the new year, horticulture staff pollard the large fig tree, cutting back a full year of growth. “It’s very stark looking, but if we didn’t do that it would overtake the garden.”

5). What advice will you give the next horticulturist in the North Garden? “First, have fun,” she says. “But second, take good care of the plants—when you don’t have these beautiful plants.”

Q: And finally, what will you miss most?
“Every plant at Como is a hidden treasure,” Yeakel-Twum says. “I really want for the garden,” she says. “But second, take good care of the plants—when you don’t have this glass building, you won’t have these beautiful plants.”
Nearly every morning of the week, Chloe the sloth comes out of her behind-the-scenes bedroom and eats breakfast while perched on the hip of Como Zoo keeper Bree Barney. The Hoffmann’s Two-toed Sloth takes her sweet time enjoying a healthy diet of sweet potatoes, melons, pears and leafy greens, before Barney approaches the tree and gives Chloe the clicker cue that signals it’s time for her to take her position, serving as official animal ambassador for Tropical Encounters.

This season, the exhibit celebrates its 10th anniversary tying together the flora and the fauna of a tropical rainforest. The first immersive interpretive habitat to break ground at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory, Tropical Encounters was the first project in a full decade of transformative improvements at Como designed to improve animal care and inspire 21st century visitors with the value of conservation. Here’s a look at how it’s grown:

TALL TREES, HIGH HUMIDITY:
“When people walk in for the first time in winter, they love the warm air and the high humidity,” says Como horticulturist Bryn Fleming. “I’ve heard visitors say that this room reminds them of being in Costa Rica, which is just the kind of tropical atmosphere we’re trying to create in here.” With its relatively small footprint, Tropical Encounters packs hundreds of species of rainforest plants into its winding paths, including a low forest of ficus that helps block the views of the snow outside, an evolving collection of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s bromeliads, and of course, an iconic kapok tree, which is the centerpiece for classroom programs about rainforest plants. The banana plants across the path from Chloe are a favorite destination for tropical birds and brown anoles, the tiny lizards that also move freely through the habitat. One of Fleming’s favorite plants is the giant Cohune Palm close to the Visitor Center. An important rainforest crop, the palms provide seed oil and the giant leaves have been used to thatch roofs in many equatorial cultures.
NATURAL HABITAT:
Opened just a year after the Visitor Center that first united Como Zoo with the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory, Tropical Encounters was also the first habitat designed with both of Como’s plant and animal resources in mind. “Tropical Encounters was really the first habitat to showcase Como’s plan for the future, and how both the Zoo and Conservatory could work together to make the case for conservation and caring about the environment even stronger,” says Jackie Sticha, president of Como Friends, which led the capital campaign to finance both projects. “Having an environment that’s available to visitors year-round has proven to be incredibly popular, and Tropical Encounters’ success really helped to fuel the design plans for Polar Bear Odyssey and the major remodel of the Seals and Sea Lions habitat we’re preparing for right now.” Growing environmental concerns about the earth’s rainforests have also made Tropical Encounters a go-to exhibit for field trip groups, Sticha says, “which is exactly what we hoped the habitat would do. Since we opened Tropical Encounters, we have nearly 100,000 more school age visitors every year, so it’s really filling an important community need.”

How to Sponsor Chloe: Tropical Encounters’ free-ranging sloth has many admirers who help provide for her care and feeding through Como Friends’ animal and garden sponsorship program. For as little as $55, supporters can receive a sponsorship package and help cover the care and feeding of Tropical Encounters’ hard-working leaf-cutter ants, the careful pruning of the habitat’s kapok tree, and the daily diets of the dozens of freshwater Amazon fish, turtles and amphibians that live in this rainforest exhibit. To learn more, visit comofriends.org.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER:
Tropical Encounters is home to more than 10 different free-flying bird species—but the dense tree canopy makes them impossible to count. Como Zoo keeper Jennifer Gleason says the most prolific are the saffron finches, “which seem to have had a little population explosion this year. I bet there are nearly 40 of them right now.” Visitors will also notice dozens of blue-gray tanagers, turquoise tanagers, silver-beaked tanagers, and rufous-crowned tanagers, but only the most seasoned birders are likely to spot a reclusive sunbittern, who lives in the habitat but is rarely seen. As the tropical palms in the habitat approach the glass roof, Gleason and Como’s horticulture staff work closely on pruning strategies that protect the birds and any nests they may have built at the top of the canopy.

SAFFRON FINCH (ADULT)  SAFFRON FINCH (FLEDGLING)  GOLDEN-HEADED MANAKIN

BLUE-GREY TANAGER  PARADISE TANAGER  SUNBITTERN

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**Protecting a Balanced Biome:**

Pesticides are completely off-limits in Tropical Encounters, where even small amounts of pest-controlling chemicals could harm the free-flying birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. Instead, horticulturists depend on biological controls like beneficial bugs to combat plant pests and create a natural environment more like a real rainforest. “Because we don’t use chemical pest controls, it’s safe for the birds to eat the bananas when they ripen on the plant,” says Gleason, who says the banana leaves grown in Tropical Encounters are also shared with the great apes in Gorilla Forest.

**Growing Challenges:**

In spite of its steamy, terrarium atmosphere, not every rainforest plant has thrived in Tropical Encounters. “In Minnesota, with only eight hours of sunlight during the winter, there are lots of plants that just can’t make it with so little light,” says Fleming. Over time, Como’s staff has cultivated heartier plant material for Tropical Encounters that can withstand the dark winters on the 45th parallel.

**Piranha or Pacu?:** Many visitors mistake the large gray fish in the freshwater exhibit for piranha, but they’re actually a close cousin—the pacu. Piranha usually have a pronounced underbite and razor-sharp teeth, while pacu have square, straight teeth, more like humans. The aquarium is home to dozens of other freshwater fish species native to the Amazon Basin including silver dollars, redtail catfish, ripsaw catfish, flagtail fish, tiger shovel-nose catfish, midas cichlid, leoparinus, plecostumus, and orange and white spotted freshwater stingrays.

**Furry Feces?:** That roughly 150-pound, 15-foot coil of slithering muscle mass curled up near the glass pond habitat is Xena, Como’s green anaconda, one of the largest snake species on earth. Though Como’s previous anaconda resident didn’t mind being stretched out to her full length and weighed by zookeepers each year, Xena has a more typical anaconda temperament and is too dangerous for keepers to handle. Once she’s eaten, it can take a few days before Xena makes the move into her behind-the-scenes lair, leaving a wake of furry feces bobbing on the surface of the water before keepers can clean it up. “She eats rabbit, so that’s what’s left over,” explains Gleason. “It’s not pretty, but that’s nature.”

**Tarantula Twins?:** Tropical Encounter’s tarantula recently molted, leaving behind an exoskeleton that looks almost like a twin tarantula. “We keep it in the display just so visitors can see what it looks like for a few days, but sometimes people worry that it’s a second spider that’s stopped moving,” says Gleason. Since spiders don’t have skeletons, many species need to shed their exoskeletons in order to grow larger.

**Not-So-Poisonous Dart Frogs?:** These colorful amphibians aren’t as scary as they sound. Since their zoo diets don’t include the rainforest prey and other toxins the frogs’ bodies use to build a chemical defense against predators, they’re not actually poisonous. Like all amphibians, these dart frogs have permeable skin, putting them at greater risk from human contaminants and other pollutants.

**Fungus Farmers?:** Like all leaf-cutter ants, Como’s colony actively cultivates a fungus, feeding it freshly cut plant material. The ants can carry more than 5,000 times their body weight in vegetation, and form some of the largest and most complex animal societies on earth.

**Mata Mata Meal Prep?:** With a shell that looks like bark, and a head that resembles fallen leaves and rotting meat, the mata mata turtle lies in wait until small fish come near to investigate. Then it stretches its neck out and opens its mouth wide, creating a slow pressure vacuum that sucks prey into the turtle’s mouth whole. The unusual name “mata mata” translates as “kill, kill.”
Receiving duplicate mailings?
Please help us to conserve mailing costs and paper.
If you receive more than one issue of the
Como Friends Insider, call our office at (651) 487-8229.

Please Recycle

Garden Safari Gifts

Snuggle In to Winter
Hibernate in style this season with Como-themed socks and sportswear, cozy plush and clever indoor games for kids, and Como chocolates and treats sweet enough for your Valentine.

LOCATION
Visitor Center at Como Park Zoo & Conservatory

PHONE: 651.487.8222
HOURS: Daily 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.