Challenge: The McMaster Biology Greenhouse

The McMaster Biology Greenhouse contains bamboo, bananas, a bush whose leaves move when you touch them, a chocolate tree, a coffee tree, sugar cane, palm trees, cacti, cycads, ferns, vines, insect-eating cobra plants and more. Yet it is under-visited and underused by the university community.

Problem: Lack of information

People can easily see the greenhouse, but are not sure about actually going inside. Where do you enter the greenhouse? Are you welcome to visit? If so, when?

Visitors who are given a tour are engaged and excited about plants, but those who visit by themselves get an aesthetic experience but not an intellectual one; amazing diversity but few names and no explanations.

Solution

Students, either as volunteers or taking an experiential practicum course (Biology 3EP3, Arts & Science 3X03) are documenting the collection and making it more visible to community. Students helped on Venture Engineering Camp tours, are making plant signs, just created a McMaster Biology Greenhouse Facebook page and working towards creating a website. The Facebook page (and later, the website) identifies the visiting hours when the students will explain the collection to visitors.

Plant signs

The plant signs that students and volunteer are designing give the name, the region, and a little background story about the species.

Interesting plants are a focus

During ours, we demonstrate several smaller plants with unique features: venus flytraps, sundews, cobra plants, porcupine tomato, apple of sodom, mimosa, and lithops.

Outreach to Toronto Zoo Pandas

The bamboo easily overtops the greenhouse and needs to be cut back. The Toronto Zoo nutritionists were happy with our bamboo giveaway and so were the pandas.

Learning to explain the collection

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Bamboo resprouts quickly after the harvest

http://www.biology.mcmaster.ca/