In Winter Gardens, a Marriage of Botany and Stark Beauty

For the solitary walker, frozen landscapes offer many delights.

By PAULA DEITZ

Unlike the tragic hero of Franz Schubert’s song cycle “Winter Journey” (“Farewell to the cold through the bitter weather”), multitudes of New Yorkers joyously headed for Central Park to experience in bright sunlight the season’s first pristine snowfall on a predawn Sunday. And in late-afternoon dapples, under the glow of lamplight, the glittering field of white seemed etched by circuits paths marked in the distance by streams of brightly clad walkers and the shadowy silhouettes of fences. “Invigorating crisp, clean air” was the motto of the day.

For me the winter walk, with or without snow, offers visual pleasures akin to an appreciation of sculpture with the gnarly shapes of trees unadorned and with myriad bare branches like delicate abstract drawings. But more important, with the new year begun, January ushers in an introspective period best indulged on solitary walks without the usual distractions of colorful palettes and lush foliage.

Yet, there is much to see in the sub-continental, especially in the variety of plants in local botanic gardens across the country. Since their earliest days in Europe, attached to universities, botanic gardens have thrived in urban centers; their beauty derives from scientific displays required for the orderly study and conservation of plants. But like local parks, they also play an important role as social and community environments.

For a brisk wintry stroll I selected the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, which this year is celebrating the centennial of its founding in 1910. Within its compact 52 acres surrounded by city streets, the visitor experiences several individual spaces ploised there, like the Japanease Hill-and-Pond Garden and the bonsai collection, begun in 1925. In a microcosm of the winter landscape the bonsai curator Julian S. Velasco has arranged several maples, one 113 years old, so that their leafless, outstretched miniature canopies blend through the glass wall with the haze of layered bare branches outside in the main garden. In contrast, a deep coral-blossom canna, a native of the tropics, echoes one in the Japanese garden by a rustic shelter. Here also, near the orange-tinted koi, an ever-blooming cherry tree of the palest pink was in bloom, a fragile mate to a bright green pine pruned into traditional cloud formations.

“In winter” said Scott Medbury, the garden’s president, “one learns to re-calibrate observations to detect the slow evolution of nature, the unfolding of witch hazel or the first snow drops. And in discovering the human scale of closed and open spaces here, one achieves an inner calm.”

Still, standing in front of the massive outstretched boughs of the bare yellow wood tree provides a majestic moment, and the deep purples or white clusters of berries from the viburnum family are shockingly beautiful against the bare snow. Elsewhere, one notices the mottled trunks of lace-bark pines, the gray velvet rags around magnolia and oak, the conifers deep range of blues and greens and the stubborn scarlet oak

That refuses to lose its copper leaves. Yes, there are luxurious tropical houses, but outside is the place for stark beauty. Though botanic gardens exist to harbor native and exotic plants in pleasant habitats, the grounds also offer opportunities for landscape design that can create an atmosphere of enchantment. With its 60 acres of lakes surrounding nine islands connected by bridges, the Chicago Botanic Garden harks back to the famous 19th-century Garden of Perfect Brightness, the Qianlong emperor’s pleasure-garden complex of lakes at the Old Summer Palace outside Beijing. In a frozen landscape, the high arched bridge to Chicago’s Japanese stroll garden resembles the “Nine Bridges Seen in the Snow,” one of Hiroshige’s enticing views.

Visitors either tram along trails in 100 acres of woodland, snowshoe around the garden’s perimeter or ice skate on the broad expanse originally designed by Dan Kiley with pools and fountains. While the garden’s prominent Midwinter prairies are burnt off in spring and fall, remaining dried grasses persist as waving figurative elements against the snow like the yellowed weeping willows at the water’s edge.

“Botanic gardens give freedom of movement outdoors missing on wintry city streets,” says the garden’s president, Sophia Shihld, who is often seen out walking, hat pulled over her ears. “It’s like swimming underwater thinking about myself inside myself in a way I don’t do on a hot summer day.”

Winter is something else in the mild climate of the San Antonio Botanical Garden in California, dedicated to preserving native flora of the region and maintaining a seed collection of local endangered species. The garden is one of the places associated with the prolific landscape gardener Beatrix Farrand. Last May, though, 60 of its 75 acres were destroyed, including thickly treed hillsides, when the rampaging Jesusita fire blew down Minton Canyon.

Fortunately the garden’s meadow was preserved, and, nature being resilient, young green shoots are appearing around burnt stumps, and seasonal blooms of blue snapdragons, California poppies and fleshy verbena are as plentiful as ever on a winter walk. The unexpected consequences of this disaster are the newly opened vistas of the Santa Ynez Mountains and views of the Pacific

Continued on Page 24
In Winter, Botany Meets Beauty

Ocean out to the Channel Islands. Seeing a garden in recovery mode with new prospects is surely an inspiration in the early days of a new year.

The Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Coral Gables, Fla., suffered from nature's brutality when Hurricane Andrew struck in 1992 and uprooted its valuable collection of palms and ancient cycads. Designed as a tropical garden by William Lyman Phillips in the Olmsted tradition, and now totally regenerated, the Fairchild features paths that lead visitors through an ailée of flowering trees into an infinity of exuberant tropical foliage and cascades of bougainvillea vines. With its active rain forest and lakeside mangrove glades the garden may appear to offer visitors a contrast to the spare winter adventures in the North, and yet the sense of isolation and so much botanical profusion may promote an equal amount of introspection.

Finally, in the Zen vein of contemplation, the landscape architect Chris Reed has designed a temporary installation not in a botanic garden but in Radcliffe Yard in Cambridge, Mass., that creates a dialogue between natural materials and the passage of time and succeeds in provoking thoughts about the rapidity of change. Commissioned for the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study's 150th anniversary, the installation, "Stick-Pile," features a landscape of 10 cone-shaped piles of stone, aggregates, sand and soil on a diamond-shaped grid with two piles of planted ferns in a parking lot.

Exposed to the elements these miniatures are allowed to degrade gently, unlike the famous pristine stone piles at the Silver Pavilion in Kyoto, Japan. Now blanketed in snow, these undulating Cambridge piles melting away are a reminder in the new year that time is both of the essence and fleeting.