and catalog. His own contribution is a
black-and-white, 48-inch-square night shot
of an abandoned drive-in, where the screen
shows a cartoonish reproduction of Maytag
washing machines. Again, he's given new life
and meaning to well-worn images.—A.B.P.

Garden variety

The Chicago Botanic Garden's new
president already has a green thumb.

As director of exhibitions and educa-
tion at the Field Museum of Natural
History, Sophia Siskel, AM '04, organized
blockbuster exhibits on evolution, choco-
late, pearls, and Jacqueline Kennedy's
wardrobe—a far cry from the typical
natural-history fare of dinosaur bones
and shark teeth. But one of her proudest
efforts has been her 80-acre retreat in West
Dundee, Illinois. She also tends a
small kitchen garden there, with
herbs, clematis, peonies, echina-
cea, and daylilies.

Now Siskel, 38, has married
her museum-administration
background with her affinity for
plants. This past April she
was named president and chief
executive officer of the Chicago Botanic
Garden in suburban Glencoe.
Joining the garden in February
2006 as vice president of visitor
operations, managing a staff of
more than 100, she was picked for
the garden's top job "because of
her extensive expertise in museum manage-
ment," said William J. Hagereh, chair of
the garden's board of directors, at a press con-
fERENCE announcing her appointment.

That expertise spans a range of Chicago
institutions. Along with her five-year tenure
at the Field, Siskel has worked as a cura-
tor at the Art Institute of Chicago and the
Museum of Contemporary Art. Museum
work wasn't a random career choice for
Siskel, who graduated from Wellesley
College with degrees in art history and
economics before earning a master's in
art history from Chicago and an MBA
from Northwestern's Kellogg School of
Business. Between her architect father
and her anthropologist mother, Joanne
Connolly, she says, "I really grew up in an
art-museum and natural-history-museum
world." Besides spending summers on the
family's grounds clearing buckthorn, garlic
mustard, andhoneysuckle and nurturing
native prairie plants such as gentian and
indigo (baptisia), she also traveled with her
mother, who studies Nigerian architecture's
introduction to Brazil as Africans migrated
to South America.

"Very early on I felt the important role
museums can play in people's lives," says
Siskel, who lives in Evanston with husband
Jon and sons Nathan, 4, and Jonah, 2. "I
could also pretty easily understand what
scientists were saying and the barriers to the
general public," she adds, "and could break
down scientific information in clear steps."

Siskel officially took the garden's helm
August 15, after four months of work-
ning directly with her predecessor, Barbara
Whitney Carr. She inherits a vigorous insti-
tution: the 385-acre, 35-year-old garden
is the most visited public garden in the
United States with 800,000 visitors a year. It
also boasts more members—46,000—than
any other U.S. garden. In a six-year capital
campaign that ended in June 2006, the
garden raised $148 million, and this past
July officials announced an $8 million grant
from the Daniel F. and Ada L. Rice Foun-
dation for expanding plant-conservation
operations.

In her new role Siskel doesn't do much
curating, leaving that to "the people who
work with the plants," but rather focuses on
fund-raising, strategic planning, assembling
a strong management team, and making
sure operations run smoothly. She also
inherits plans for the Rice Plant Conserva-
tion Science Center and a PhD program in
plant science and conservation, intended to
boost the garden's international profile. 
Rough blueprints for the 35,000-square-
foot center, slated for completion in 2009,
include a public corridor for visitors to
watch scientists doing genetic analysis of
seeds from Midwestern prairie plants.

"Science often seems far removed from
everyday life," says Siskel, "but it becomes
more part of a normal life when people
see the scientists in the lab look just like
them. They're 20 years old, they're 40 years,
they're in clothes like everyone else wears.
They're not just 65-year-old men in white
lab coats."

Siskel also hopes, by 2009, to increase
pedestrian access to the garden's 100-acre
McDonald Woods, much of which is over-
run by invasive buckthorn and garlic mus-
tard. A garden team is at work clearing the
woods—cutting down the brush and put-
ting poison on its stems, and the following
year cutting down the seedlings and doing
a burn. "It's an intensive process," says
Siskel, "but it's worth it when it opens up a whole area, not only for
the public but also for the native
plants that live there."

The 11 acres currently open to
visitors were part of the garden's
original property, while the other
89 were added more recently. "I
hope that by opening the woods
to the public," Siskel says, "we will
give people a natural experience
that is full of unstructured experi-
cences and the joys of discovery."

Thanks to her father, as a child
Siskel had "a great deal of freedom
in the woods," and she hopes that
these acres provide children without
a backyard, let alone a fen, similar opportuni-
ties to explore.

She walks the garden's grounds almost
daily, preferring to take guests around
on foot rather than by golf cart. "Every day
a different place is in a different type of
bloom," she says. "On an evocative gray
day I very much like the Japanese garden,
and the early spring bulb garden shows
the early blooming tulips and daffodils."

In mid-summer, she adds, "the Circle Garden
is quite beautiful—it showcases all of our
annuals. And of course the rose gardens
smell terrific."—Laura Patre