
THE SCENT TRAIL

Introduction

One of the most successful activities of recent years at the Utrecht Botanic Gardens has been the Scent Trail. It was also one of the first examples of a project set up in close co-operation with an external organization, an interlink project. The scent trail was part of the festival Scent and Smell, a project initiated by the bureau Explorama. During the summer of 1990, Explorama organized a series of events; a play, an exhibition at the University Museum and various symposia as a way of interesting the general public in science. The bureau supported the Gardens by providing leaflets and with advertising. Their contacts with organizations outside the university had a very positive effect on the Trail and in particular their media contacts were very effective.

Developing the trail

The trail consisted of a set of two different routes. The first route through the Garden could be followed by each individual visitor. Signs at intervals, near several plants provided information on the type of scent, its use and origin. The second part of the trail was a guided tour. The guides received training which enabled them to answer most, if not all, of the questions about the role of scent in the plant kingdom. The tours were held in the evening, starting at 19.00 hours.

The scent trail presentation answered the following questions:

- what is the basic philosophy to this kind of activity?
- how can such an activity be implemented?
- do we have the right plants?
- do we have enough guides?
- what kind of signs do we use?
- how should we promote such an activity?

Basic philosophy of the Trail

Initially the Gardens were asked to provide fragrant plants for the exhibition. If we had restricted ourselves to this, then we would have been little more than a flower shop, which we did not want. We chose to work within several limits, partly because of practical reasons, partly

out of principle:

- the trail had to be "on-site"
- all plants would remain in their normal locations in the Gardens
- every plant used would illustrate something
- every story had to be directly related to the plant
- visitors had to be able to smell (or see) what the guides were talking about
- the trail had to invite people to actively participate.

Organization

The main problems we found in organizing the trails were:

- Which plants to use.
The total collection of the Garden is large, but not all plants are accessible and in some periods many plants do not have flowers.
- The short preparation time.
The first contact was on April 12th, the idea appeared on May 22th and the first tour took place on June 21th. This gave use four weeks to do the research, instruct the guides, produce information panels and organize the publicity.
- How to anticipate the number of visitors per evening.

The plants

We have one of the few systematic gardens in The Netherlands. It contains many different species of plants from many different families, which gave us a wide choice of suitable plants concentrated in one part of the garden. This was very important because we could not, and did not want to, adjust any part of the garden in such a short time. It enabled us to present a scent trail of approximately 1½ hours. Control of the duration was important because the trails did not start until the evening at 19.00 hours. Visitors start to lose interest after 1½ hours and tend to wander off into the Gardens. Normally this is no problem but in the evening we wanted to prevent people getting trapped inside the Gardens! The restriction did mean that other parts of the Gardens were hardly accessible. An unexpected side-effect was that sometimes the systematic garden appeared overcrowded. However, we were able to

make practical use of the Rock Garden and although it does not contain many fragrant plants, it did give us the opportunity to by-pass possibly overcrowded areas. It also is one of the most beautiful parts of our gardens.

Preparation time

To organize such an activity in only four weeks is difficult. We had to organize the work in different parts: advertising, research, guide-instructions, making the signs. A scent trail of 1½ hours can include approximately 10 plants. We first chose a small number of plants and then instructed the guides. This does not take too much time. For a number of plants we made signs. Together with a map these signs enabled visitors to enjoy the trail without using a guided tour (@1,500 of the maps were used) The signs were effective landmarks for our guides. New plants were added to the tour and for each new plant, instruction-leaflets were issued and given to the guides.

This arrangement enabled us to work on the trail for more than two months. We asked our regular guides to co-operate in the scent trail and nearly all of them were prepared to lead some extra tours in the evenings. We also recruited and instructed several extra guides, especially for the evenings.

Visitor-numbers

One of the major problems of the tours is the number of visitors and the number of guides needed. As we were not able to sell tickets in advance or make reservations, the number of visitors could not be checked effectively. The number of visitors can be influenced by the amount of publicity. The first wave of publicity was taken care of by "Explorama" who incorporated the trail in their publicity for the festival. At first this was not very effective. Following a week of very poor attendance, the Gardens advertised once in several local papers which resulted in an increase in numbers of visitors. Initially we received approximately 30-40 but this steadily increased until over 80. The increase was due to word-of-mouth advertising and very good weather. Only three guides were available each evening. When over 60 visitors were received by the Gardens this became a slight problem as guiding tours of over 20 persons is not very easy, particularly if the guides need to show several

details of the plants. However, a self-regulating mechanism took control, visitors either decided to come back another evening or to use our alternative, the non-guided walk (described above).

Evaluation

Several points need to be taken into account:

- The preparation needed to have been longer. This would have given us more time to think out the programme more carefully. Rushing tends to make people nervous, limiting the amount of research and leaving several questions unanswered. Generally this is not a problem as nearly everything a guide relates is new to most visitors and they also do not mind if the guide does not know everything.
- The large number of guided tours, over 100, placed a heavy burden on the 23 guides, especially as these were extra tours - our standard-tours had to be guided too.

An important detail is that the number of guided tours rose during 1990. The trail took place during the summer, at which time many people (including guides) are on holiday. We did manage to train extra guides, but one should be aware of not asking too much from voluntary guides.

The keys to success

The success of the trail could not be put down solely to the special opening-hours of the gardens. Important factors included:

- The use of a familiar subject. Nearly everyone can detect the special scent of a plant.
- The theme was consistent with the basic work of the botanic gardens. The difference between most gardens and our university botanic garden is that we support research. We try to make scientific data available to the general public. We do not only show plants but we also give details about the function of the things people see.
- People were able to feel, touch and smell the plants. This was probably the most important factor. The Gardens have to

compete with television programmes on plant and animal lives but although the television can give excellent pictures, it cannot supply scent or touch and this is our advantage

- The trail gave the visitors surprising explanations for familiar phenomena.
People tend to think that whatever smells nice has to be nice. They very rarely realise that secondary plant metabolism is often used as a defensive mechanism. For instance, cumarine (the smell of fresh hay), is very poisonous.
- The fact that we did everything ourselves.
We made our own signs, our leaflets were designed to be photocopied on our own machine etc. This gave the organization much flexibility. As soon as we noticed a change (e.g. a plant lost its flowers) we were able to react. It also reduced the costs. The decision to do everything ourselves forced us to keep the project comparably simple. Combined with the desire to be correct, it produced an elegant project which was very attractive to many people. It is something they still talk about.

Conclusion

We are very satisfied with the evening-tours. It takes some extra work but it is worth it. They can be as expensive as you want them to be and in return provide the Gardens with good publicity. Linking the Garden with activities outside the garden is useful as it attracts visitors who do not usually visit the Gardens.

The Scent trail had such a positive effect that we decided to use the same formula for a new tour. The subject is "Plantlore" which explores different kinds of folkstories all about plants.

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