

# OCC maps zoo plant life



A rare ginkgo tree can be found on the grounds of the Detroit Zoo.

By Teri Banas  
staff writer

Marshall Backeroot was looking for a field project for one of his classes when he stopped in at the Detroit Zoo.

Backeroot, director of the landscape technology program at Oakland Community College's Auburn Hills campus, knew the zoo hired a new horticulturist.

Backeroot wanted to rejuvenate the college's program with real work, and the horticulturist, Michael Anusbigian, wanted to restore the beauty of the zoo's botanical gardens.

"I had been driving by the zoo for a number of years, and all of a sudden just went in," Backeroot said. "Mike had a lot of ideas. We had a warm reception. It was exciting."

SINCE THAT meeting, Backeroot's class has spent months discovering and identifying more than 200 varieties of trees at the zoo. Last week, class members labeled the trees for a "tree tour guide" for zoo visitors. A pamphlet written by the students will accompany a map of the trees.

The zoo was created in the 1920s as a botanical garden, carefully cultivated by Frank McInnis, one of the early and most prominent directors.

"There's no place like it in Detroit," Anusbigian said. Anusbigian got his start at Michigan State University and owned a landscape company before joining the zoo last December.

Many of the newly discovered trees are not native to the region and have become neglected.

"The grounds here had been pretty much let go for 20 years, plus some," Anusbigian said.

CLASS MEMBERS discovered a ginkgo tree, called the oldest plant in the world, "like a living fossil," Anusbigian said. Found chiefly in Japan, Korea and China, the species lived during the dinosaur age and is nearly immune to insects or diseases.



Marshall Backeroot of OCC and zoo horticulturist Michael Anusbigian combined efforts to map the unusual plant life at the zoo.

cases. A ginkgo can be found behind the Penguinarium at the zoo.

The big leaf magnolia is native to central Florida, Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi. It typically grows to 50 feet. The zoo's tree is smaller, 18 feet, because of the short growing season here.

Several Kentucky coffee trees, natives of Tennessee and northern Missouri, were found. The zoo's best example — 60 feet high — is between the parking lot and reptile building.

SINCE HIS arrival, Anusbigian has tried to cre-

ate a more pleasant environment for animals and visitors. Shade trees have been planted in many previously bare exhibits for the animals' comfort.

More than half the plants formerly pruned are nutritious, so Anusbigian has begun having them fed to the animals.

He also plans to plant 40 of his favorite trees — eastern white pines — along the zoo's new entrance, being built at Woodward and 10 Mile. The eastern white pine, by the way, is Michigan's state tree.

Photos by  
Rick Smith



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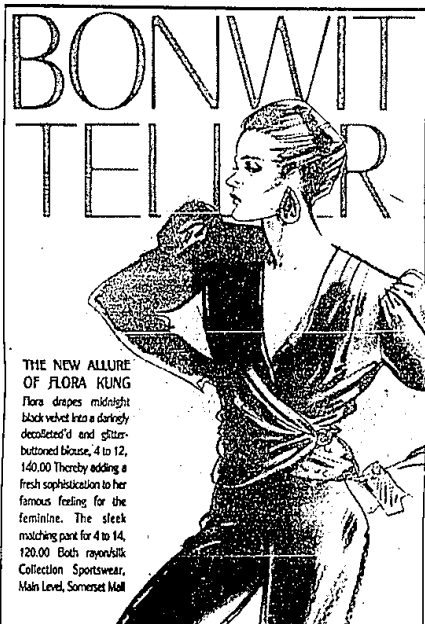
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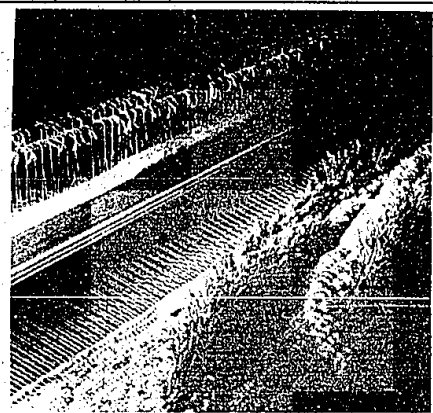
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