

Recommendation to Change the Name of “Cornell Plantations” To “Cornell Botanic Gardens”

We cannot look to the past, good as it is; we must draw our inspiration from the future.

— Liberty Hyde Bailey ⁽¹⁾

Executive Summary

Primary Reasons for a Name Change:

- (1) “Cornell Botanic Gardens” more clearly identifies the organization as a public garden and reflects its mission, vision, collections, and programs—past, present, and future.
- (2) The new name is more supportive of the mission, vision, and core values of Cornell Plantations, Cornell University, and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.
- (3) A recent branding study, conducted by an external consultant, found clear and significant support for a new name among those who have been actively engaged with the organization, including Cornell faculty and students, donors, Advisory Council, staff, and volunteers. (see pp 4–5)

Additional Rationale, Advantages and Opportunities

- Beyond its context as part of Cornell history (and only since 1944), the name “Cornell Plantations” has little or no meaning for alumni, students, faculty, community members, or visitors. It was originally called the “Cornell Arboretum,” and in fact, University Trustees were initially hesitant to support Liberty Hyde Bailey’s proposal to change the name to “Cornell Plantations.” ⁽²⁾
- “Cornell Botanic Gardens” instantly evokes what anyone can expect to find here. The name “Cornell Plantations” requires constant explanation and bears no relationship to the fact that it comprises a botanic garden, arboretum, and extensive network of natural areas.
 - In its most benign context, the word “plantation” refers to an agricultural enterprise where masses of plants, typically the same variety, are grown for harvest, production, or research.
 - For many people, “plantation” has a negative association, evoking periods of history, regimes and places associated with slavery and oppression in America and around the world.
 - Cornell Plantations and Cornell University officials regularly receive queries, complaints, and demands regarding the use and appropriateness of the name “Plantations.”
- The name change is an opportunity to reaffirm the organization’s, CALS’ and the University’s commitment to excellence, openness, diversity, and inclusion. Furthermore, a new name is expected to open new avenues and sources of significant funding and support.
- Changing the name to “Cornell Botanic Gardens” is also an opportunity to promote and strengthen the relevance of the organization’s mission as it engages more deeply with students and faculty to address and interpret important environmental issues.

Introduction

With new leadership at Cornell and Cornell Plantations (CP), and with the establishment of *Global Cornell* and *Engaged Cornell* initiatives, it is appropriate to reconsider the mission and vision of the organization within those contexts. Dr. Christopher Dunn was hired as *The E. N. Wilds Director of Plantations* in 2014. At the request of Dean Kathryn Boor, Dr. Dunn, the staff and Advisory Council have been engaged for the past year in strategic planning, a branding study, and consideration of whether the name “Cornell Plantations” supports the mission, vision, values and brand of the organization, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS), and Cornell University.

Brief History of Cornell Plantations

The brief history and timeline provided here is taken largely from Professor Ralph S. Hosmer’s book, *“The Cornell Plantations: A History,”* published in 1947 by Cornell University.⁽³⁾ Hosmer was actively involved in the establishment of CP; thus, his history is essentially a first-hand account.

1875	Statute issued by President A. D. White states that the grounds of Cornell University will include a botanic garden.
1897–1911	Botany Professors Albert Prentiss and Willard Rowlee advance the idea of developing a botanic garden and arboretum on the campus.
1928	Arboretum Committee established (advisory to the Board of Trustees).
1934–35	Board of Trustees approved a general plan for the “Cornell Arboretum,” but did not allocate any funding; a Temporary Arboretum Committee of the Board established.
1939	Trustee Arboretum Committee (TAC) formed and submits a report to full Board of Trustees. Key elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recommended that the University commit to creating an arboretum.• Should be financed by NYS, the University, and gifts (under auspices of Provost).• Supported the enlarged scope of landscapes, teaching, research, and outreach activities proposed by Liberty Hyde Bailey — but, did not initially endorse Bailey’s recommended name of “Cornell Plantations.”⁽²⁾
1940	President Day replaces the TAC with the Arboretum Administrative Committee.
1944	In anticipation of Bailey’s enhanced vision and scope, the Board of Trustees agrees to change the name from “Cornell Arboretum” to “Cornell Plantations.”

Liberty Hyde Bailey’s vision of “Cornell Plantations” was expansive, far greater than the Cornell Arboretum at the time, and indeed, larger than our present-day holdings. He called for “a new type of botanical garden ... to unify into one organic whole a series of enterprises that are based on the land,” and envisioned it to include:

- Agricultural enterprises, including crop and livestock production
- Development of better forms of plants and livestock
- Collections of wild, economic, and ornamental plants
- Education and investigation

As ambitious as Bailey’s vision was, it was never wholly achieved within CP, although many of his original expectations have subsequently attained world-class status as programs within other units of the university, including in CALS and the College of Veterinary Medicine. In fact, there was little cohesive or intentional development of new horticultural collections or gardens until the mid-1960s and early 1970s.

Evolution of the Botanic Gardens, Arboretum & Natural Areas

Most of the development to create CP as we know it today has occurred in the past 40 years. The first major garden—the Robison York State Herb Garden—was built in 1974; F. R. Newman Arboretum was completed in 1982; and Plantations assumed stewardship of Cornell’s natural areas in 1977. Through the 1980s and 90s, many distinctive horticultural collections were established. The Mullestein Winter Garden was dedicated in 2001, and a 10-year series of major facility renovation and new construction projects culminated in the opening of the Nevin Welcome Center in 2011.

CP’s holdings today comprise 135 acres in the botanic gardens and arboretum, and 3,400 acres of natural areas (44 separate preserves). As a result, CP has the 5th largest holdings of natural areas of any botanic garden in North America. The horticultural collections include more than 50,000 accessioned plants representing over 16,000 different types of plants. The gardens and natural areas serve as outdoor classrooms, and CP staff support teaching and research in CALS, and increasingly in other departments across campus. More than 70,000 people visit each year, and over 11,000 lifelong learners participate in its education and public outreach programs. Last year *Best College Reviews* ranked Newman Arboretum as #1 of the “50 Most Beautiful College Arboretums.”

Cornell is a global institution and CP is a recognized leader among botanic gardens worldwide for the strength of its horticultural collections, conservation initiatives, and environmental education programs. In collaboration with the Section of Horticulture in the CALS School of Integrative Plant Science, Plantations offers a Masters of Professional Studies degree in Public Garden Leadership. The American Public Garden Association has recognized CP’s Climate Change Garden and associated programming for leadership and innovation in education and public outreach. Thanks to CP’s stewardship of natural areas that are home to rare species, Cornell University earned full points for biodiversity conservation and Gold status for the fourth consecutive year in the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System.

Thus, the unit called “Cornell Plantations” has expanded and grown from being the caretakers of a few test gardens and research collections to a full-fledged public garden with world-class horticultural collections and conservation and education programs that exemplify and support Cornell University’s land-grant mission to the world.

Strategic Planning & Brand Evaluation

In 2015, Cornell Plantations initiated a strategic planning process to update its mission, vision, and operating goals, and with the approval of Dean Kathryn Boor and President Elizabeth Garrett, commissioned an external examination of its brand. The brand study was conducted by Beacon Associates, a firm that had previously done work for the Dyson and Johnson Schools at Cornell, and was designed to determine:

1. How the current CP brand is perceived by those most familiar with it (“brand fans”),
2. Which of the current and future strategic directions are supported by current brand fans, and
3. As the organization evolves and looks ahead, whether the current name fits the brand.

The process

- **Phase 1 – Qualitative Focus Groups.** Seven sessions were conducted in fall 2015 with “brand fans”: individuals who are regularly engaged with CP and have positive feelings about the organization. Participants included Cornell faculty, former student interns, CP staff, Advisory Council members, long-time donors, and volunteers. The focus group findings (language, emotions, imagery around the brand) were used to develop an online survey for the second phase.

- **Phase 2 – Quantitative Survey.** In January 2016, an online survey was distributed to 2,785 donors and CP e-newsletter subscribers to assess how these supporters relate to the brand. It asked for opinions on three concept statements describing the essence of CP, which were derived from the focus group discussions. The statements referenced (1) the historic relationship between Cornell’s founding mission and CP; (2) the “learning laboratory” attributes of CP, including its academic relationships with faculty and students; and (3) a possible new commitment to demonstrating and teaching about “biocultural diversity”: the relationships between plants, people, and human cultures.

KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Brand Dimensions

- *The brand’s **strongest characteristics relate to its association with Cornell University.*** CP is viewed as:
 - an important element in the university’s legacy, particularly around the value and importance of the land and our relationship with it,
 - central to the scenic character of Cornell, especially the beauty of the gorges and natural lands.
- *Respondents derived the **greatest benefits from connecting with nature through the arboretum, natural areas, and gardens.*** Also cited of significant benefit were free access, and walking and strolling through these areas.
- *The concept evaluations indicate **strong affiliation with and support for CP’s ties to its Cornell legacy, and its role in research and learning across disciplines at the University.*** These speak to the “heart” and “head” aspects of the brand.
- ***Interest in and support for the biocultural concept also was very strong.*** In fact, the consultants noted that it was unusual for a new concept to receive such a positive endorsement.

Name

- **70–76% of all respondents support a new name.** The consultants advised that any organization should consider a name change if as few as 15% of its brand fans support a new name.
- **80–88% of respondents who identified as faculty, staff, or Advisory Council members support a new name.**
- **55% chose Cornell Botanic Gardens,** or a derivation thereof (e.g., Cornell Botanic Gardens and Natural Areas), when selecting an appropriate name, from the 11 options provided in the survey, for each of the three concepts. **72% of faculty, staff and Advisory Council respondents chose such an option.**

Consultant’s Key Recommendations

Give strong consideration to changing the name

The current name has weak support, being a first choice for only one quarter of today’s brand fans. Its relevance to the future of the organization is not high. Now appears to be a good time to embrace a new name, particularly as the biocultural pillar offers an opportunity to generate new interest in, and enthusiasm and support for, the organization from more diverse audiences.

Create a unified identity for the “work” done at CP

Solidify recognition of the brand as providing plant expertise; a place for research and learning, conservation and building a lasting future; and integrate it into the core identity of the organization to build its importance in the eyes of current and potential supporters. Make this as important as the Cornell heritage and legacy linkages. CP is integral to Cornell University’s past, present, and future.

Tie together physical elements (gardens, arboretum, gorges, Beebe Lake, off-campus natural areas)

Create a higher sense of identity and uniqueness for the CP experience. Refer to the totality as the “botanic gardens,” rather than focusing on individual landscape elements of gardens, arboretum, and natural areas.

Integrate the biocultural pillar into the brand

This can serve as a unifying element for the current “cultivation, conservation and education” triad. Through it, CP can become more closely associated with, and relevant to, the academic mission of virtually every discipline at Cornell University. Furthermore, this may be a more contemporary and compelling way to attract new donors to support the organization.

Propel the organization forward

With new leadership and a window of opportunity for excitement comes an opportunity to increase the relevance of the organization, as it engages more deeply with Cornell University in addressing and interpreting major contemporary environmental issues, and their impact on the natural world and human cultures.

Going Forward: Acknowledging History

For nearly two years, CP has been engaged in a lengthy and inclusive process to thoughtfully consider whether the name “Cornell Plantations” supports the mission, vision, values and brand of the organization, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS), and Cornell University. Although there are issues with the current name, it is true that some will be disappointed (if not offended) by a name change. It is the hope of many that support for CP will be based on its excellence in horticulture, conservation, and education, and its contributions to the University and the community, rather than based on its name alone. However, CP will fully acknowledge the “old” name and history in its interpretation and educational programs.

Recommendation to the Board of Trustees

Approve the New Name:

Cornell Botanic Gardens

Notes

(1) Bailey, L.H. (1893). Recent progress in American horticulture. Pages 300-309 in *Fourteenth Annual Report (1892) of the Ontario Agricultural and Experimental Union*. Guelph, Ontario: Warwick Bros. and Rutter.

(2) Report from the Trustee Arboretum Committee to the Cornell University Board of Trustees. Oct. 1939. As reprinted in Hosmer (1947; p. 157).

(3) Hosmer, R.S. (1947). *The Cornell Plantations: A History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

ADDENDUM: CONCEPT STATEMENTS FROM SURVEY

EZRA (speaks to the legacy ties between Cornell Plantations and the university)

In 1865, Ezra Cornell donated his farmland to create Cornell University. Since then, the institution, its people and visitors have been inspired by the gorges, gardens, trails and plantings that embrace the campus and make up Cornell Plantations.

At Cornell, we are shaped and made whole by the land and the richness it adds to our lives. When we study the natural processes around us, or pause to contemplate the landscape, smell a fresh garden herb or gaze upon a flower, we gain insight into ourselves, and the value of our world. Ezra's vision was prescient – what was true then about connecting with the land, is true now... and will be of even greater value in the future.

Today, at Cornell Plantations, we protect, preserve and learn from 150 years of building on his legacy. The gardens, collections and research serve a community far greater than what might ever have been imagined – carrying Ezra's vision forward to the benefit of all at Cornell and beyond.

LIVING LABORATORY (emphasizes the research and learning activities at Cornell Plantations)

In the gardens, forests, fields, gorges and bogs of the 3400 acre Cornell Plantations, university students and professors are advantaged with a unique resource for studying and teaching about the natural world.

Artists and writers come to find their muse. Architects, geologists and engineers observe structures, systems and dynamics. Plant scientists, horticulturalists, ecologists, landscape designers and anthropologists study how plants function, their behavior and how they impact and enrich our lives through nourishment, medicine, spirituality and culture.

On a more casual level, visitors, walkers and recreationalists gain appreciation of the outdoors. And, horticulturalists come to see and learn about our plantings and collections. The facilities are open and free for all to enjoy. And staff and volunteers are always available to answer questions and / make connections with experts.

At Cornell Plantations, the gardens are alive with inspiration and learning for all to discover.

BIOCULTURAL CENTER (exploration around the relationship between plants, people, and cultures)

Today, plant species across the globe are threatened. At Cornell Plantations, we are committed to preserving the world's plants, and supporting the human cultures that sustain and are nourished by them.

The decline or loss of plant species often has wide-reaching impact on human culture and prosperity. Where the Biocultural relationship weakens or is broken, both suffer. Where it is strong, richness grows.

In the gardens, arboretum and natural areas at Cornell Plantations, we study, demonstrate and teach about plants and Biocultural relationships. And, we engage with cultures across the globe to learn from their Biocultural partnerships. What we learn is taught in Cornell classrooms, published in scientific journals and shared to the benefit of everyone who visits.

Our goal is to improve the planet -- engaging and inspiring as many minds and souls as we can on preserving and benefitting from the soundness and richness of Biocultural diversity.