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Green Thumbs-Up

Teamsters Local 703 Conservatory Workers Toil in the Soil to Create Fantastic Horticultural Exhibits

The walls and floor glisten from the early morning plant watering. Endless, lush tangled foliage stretches across the 55,000 square foot Palm House.



Local 703 Union Steward Larry Reyes cultivates soil in the Palm House.

A large palm soars across the glass ceiling, adorned with sunlight peeking through its large fanning leaves. Larry Reyes directed me to a large cluster of exotic plants in the center of the room. And there, in the midst of the plants, was the largest seed imagined, almost looking like a huge gray stone.

“It’s a Double Coconut Palm Seed from Sri Lanka,” he explained. He pointed to the enormous 41-year old palm tree, with leaves so tall that they touched the conservatory’s high 60-foot tall ceiling. “And that tree is from the same kind of seed. Experts grew it from seed and it took five years just to germinate the seed.”

Reyes is one of 26 Teamsters Local 703 members employed at Garfield Park Conservatory. One of the largest conservatories in the world under one

glass, the conservatory was opened to the public in 1908 and was one of the first to display plants in a natural looking landscaped setting instead of in groups of pots.

Another equally beautiful conservatory in Chicago is Lincoln Park Conservatory, which employs an additional 18 Teamster Local 703 members.

Both conservatories are living museums that house many rare and unique plant species.

Reyes started as a laborer at Garfield in 1974 and worked his way up to a Florist Class II Grower. He says the hands-on experience he obtained from when he first started gave him the skills he has today.

“I picked up skills through the ‘old-timers’ that they don’t teach you in class,” he said with a laugh.



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Some of the newer staff at Lincoln and Garfield have college degrees in horticulture, although it was not required when Reyes was hired.



Garfield Park Conservatory Teamsters

“When I first started working at Garfield, we only had one guy who had a degree in horticulture,” said Reyes, smiling at the memory. “The rest of us learned our jobs in the field from the growers.”

Most of the members at Garfield have been there more than 20 years. The conservatory has been unionized with Local 703 since approximately around the end of World War II.

“This is such a terrific, hardworking group of people,” said Thomas W. Stiede, Teamsters Local 703 Secretary-Treasurer. “Their work in propagating plants for their flower shows and landscaping is incredible. I am very proud to have Garfield and Lincoln Park Conservatories as part of our union membership.”



Carol Filipiak prepares to change out the plants in one of Lincoln’s aquatic displays.

Each of the eight houses at Garfield has a particular focus with its horticultural exhibits and floral displays. Six galleries have permanent displays, and the remaining two are exhibit show houses themed around particular plant groups or plant attributes.

Reyes and his team work mostly in the tropical section of the conservatory. They are responsible for a number of behind-the-scenes tasks, which are crucial to rejuvenating the plant collections and keeping the greenery and exhibits lush and beautiful year-round.

The florists, or more formally titled floral horticulturalists, are specialists in growing and know everything about plants. They are experts in all parts of plant cultivation and propagation including seeding, cutting, layering, budding and grafting. They also protect the plants from pests and diseases.



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“We grow most of what you see right here in our greenhouses,” said Steve Meyer, a horticulturalist who has been a Teamster for eight years at Lincoln. “The more unique plants were exchanged with other conservatories from around the country.”



Lincoln Park Conservatory Teamsters

The workers maintain the outside gardens and nursery at both conservatories. They also care for nine greenhouses, some as large as the size of a football field.

In addition to their daily responsibilities, the workers are in a constant state of preparation changing out displays for the various seasonal flower shows and festivals held at both facilities.

“It’s a great job, but it’s not for everyone,” said Amy Greenamy, who has a degree in horticulture and is the newest member at Lincoln. “It’s not glamorous—you have to like soil—and there’s lots of lifting, which can result in injury if you are not careful. But it’s definitely never dull.”



Mario Figueroa hauls rocks for a new flower show at Lincoln.

Along with physical lifting, the workers’ environmental hardiness is constantly tested with the abundance of allergens and insects.

All of which points to what the staff love about their jobs—variety.

“I just can’t get enough of the design work that keeps our gardens flourishing,” said Steve Kalinski, whose main responsibility is Garfield’s aquatics. “You have to like hard work in this job, though. It takes the entire crew to take the aquatic plants out of the ponds and bring them inside in November, and take them back out in the spring.”

The aquatic plants are in large black tubs, which are heavy to haul with the rocks and wet sod that keeps the tubs secure at the bottom of the ponds.



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“We work at a nonstop pace, especially in the spring and fall,” said Neil Gilbert, a floriculturist in Lincoln’s lakefront region.

People apparently aren’t the only ones who enjoy the conservatories, as the staff have discovered throughout the years.

“There are a lot of fat squirrels and birds around here,” said Reyes, pointing at a plump brown squirrel amidst the tropical plants, nibbling on a macadamia nut. “They’ve got it made in here with all the fresh fruits and nuts.”