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A 'Wonderland' Adventure in the Bronx

A show at the New York Botanical Garden, inspired by Lewis Carroll's books, will explore his fictional and real worlds through plants, art and artifacts.

By **Laurel Graeber**

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Rabbits appear frequently at the New York Botanical Garden. The one that the public will soon see there, however, isn't a typical little brown cottontail. About 12 feet tall, this creature will hold a pocket watch and have fur made of cream-colored *Sedum* foliage, a waistcoat of yellowy-green *Sedum* and a maroon jacket of *Alternanthera* leaves.

But he's not late for a very important date. Created by the Canadian company Mosaïcultures Internationales de Montréal, this White Rabbit will be right on time for the festive May 18 opening of "Wonderland: Curious Nature," an exhibition inspired by Lewis Carroll's books "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" and "Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There."

What visitors will find, the garden's staff hopes, is their own adventure.

In the exhibition, "you're caught out and drawn into something that's out of your ordinary experience," Jennifer R. Gross, the show's guest curator, said during a behind-the-scenes visit with the project's creative team. For adults as well as children, she added, the spectacle offers "a lot of different moments, where they can hopefully get pleasantly unsettled."

That pleasant unsettling will occur indoors and outdoors at this Bronx public garden, as the exhibition explores Carroll's fictional and real worlds through fantastical plants, Victorian artifacts and modern artworks.

Overlooking the Rockefeller Rose Garden, Yoko Ono's large-scale interactive chess set, "Play It by Trust" (1966/2011), recalls the living chess pieces in "Through the Looking Glass," but its all-white form makes competitive play virtually impossible.

"That it's about peace, that it's about navigating a space together but not having to win, really seemed very poignant for me at this particular time," Gross said.

Near the garden's Thain Family Forest, the Brooklyn artist Alyson Shotz's site-specific sculpture "A World Made of Time," about nine feet high and made up of around 200 pieces of polished stainless-steel mirrors, will hang from a standing armature like a shimmering curtain.

"There's a strange bending of time and space in both books," Shotz said in a video interview, adding that she wanted her work "to almost seem like a portal."

Visitors will pass through a real portal inside the Haupt Conservatory, where the garden is constructing a giant rabbit hole from tree stumps, roots and vines. This passage will lead from a section of plants that the mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, might have encountered himself, to a far wilder space called the Wonderland Garden.

"A lot of what I was looking for was things that don't look real," said Marc Hachadourian, the garden's director of glasshouse horticulture and a senior curator. "And that you have to stop and kind of question yourself — whether the colors look unnatural, the plant form feels unnatural. There's a curiousness to it that begs you to stop and interact."

He pointed out specimens like spotted begonias, which look as if they have been scribbled on by a giddy doodler, and African daisies that over time change color from white to deep purple. The rotating global array will also include tassel ferns, which Hachadourian called "living hula skirts," and rabbit's-foot ferns, named for their fuzzy rhizomes.

The Carroll books have a macabre side, so visitors shouldn't be surprised to discover carnivorous plants as well, and a corpse flower, whose massive leaves resemble green tree trunks. The flower isn't likely to be in malodorous bloom during the show, which runs through Oct. 27, but another olfactory surprise awaits: a geranium variety whose foliage smells exactly like lemons, a scent that deters hungry herbivores.

It's an example of the exhibition's "potential to teach people about plant evolution, plant diversity," Hachadourian said.

Scientific information on the show's labels will explain other oddities, like the bulbous Southeast Asian ant plants (*Myrmecodia tuberosa*), which have a symbiotic relationship with ants living inside them. (The garden specimens, however, won't have any native bugs, which are about as friendly as the Queen of Hearts was to Alice.)

The show's hundreds of plants also include a cup-and-saucer vine and the parrot's beak flower, which may remind Carroll fans of the chatty blossoms in "Through the Looking Glass."

"Throughout the story, Alice is encountering these uncanny flowers that can speak or move in anthropomorphic ways, so we're touching on that wherever we can," said Joanna L. Groarke, the garden's vice president for exhibitions and programming.

That theme will continue on the conservatory's topiary-filled lawn, which will display "Shrumen Lumen," two 11-foot-tall kinetic mushroom sculptures by the international art group Foldhaus Collective. Made of aluminum and steel covered by translucent, hand-folded plastic, the

sculptures contain colored LED lights that will give them vibrant hues and varied patterns during evening hours. The collective's leaders, Jesse Silver and Joerg Student, explained that internal motors enable each mushroom to move, rising about four feet and then descending. "There's a weird sensation when you're standing underneath it and watching them growing," Silver said. "You do feel like you're shrinking a bit."

Alice herself often changes size in Wonderland, and the outdoor installation "Homegrown," by the London-based architect Andre Kong, reflects the moment when she grows to the point of almost bursting out of the White Rabbit's dwelling. Kong's artwork, a timber-framed house about 20 feet high, also alludes to the transformative mushroom Alice eats: Its brick walls, which his studio created with the company Ecovative, consist of hemp mixed with mycelium, mushrooms' below-ground fungal filaments.

The house's mushroom-sprouting interior, Kong explained, "makes you slightly dizzy, in some ways, because all of the walls are leaning towards you and away from you."

Other mushrooms — those with psychoactive properties — will be found inside the garden's Mertz Library, which will highlight Carroll's historical and scientific influences. In addition to plant specimens, exhibits will consist of artifacts like books and papers by Charles Darwin, Victorian children's games, and amateur paintings of fungi.

"In the Victorian era, a lot of these new mind-altering plants are being introduced from the edges of empire," said Michaela Wright, the garden's manager of interpretive content. She added, "There's a lot of self-experimentation at this point that we would associate with the 1960s, right? But, actually, the Victorians are doing it first."

The hallucinatory quality of Carroll's books has intrigued both literary critics and artists. In the library, contemporary artworks will include a giant mushroom sculpture by Carsten Höller, surrealistic videos by Beverly Semmes and Paula Wilson, miniature dioramas by Patrick Jacobs and futuristic canvases by Agus Putu Suyadnya. The photographer Abelardo Morell will contribute his own three-dimensional Alice scenes, based on images of the original books' pages.

Whether through art, fanciful plants or public programs, the exhibition is designed to make visitors slow down and observe, Groarke said.

"That's the experience we're trying to create, that inspires you to wonder more about the world," she said. "And I think that's what Carroll was doing."