

Grassroots Report

One of the "World's Most Beautiful Libraries"

by Jennifer Burek Pierce

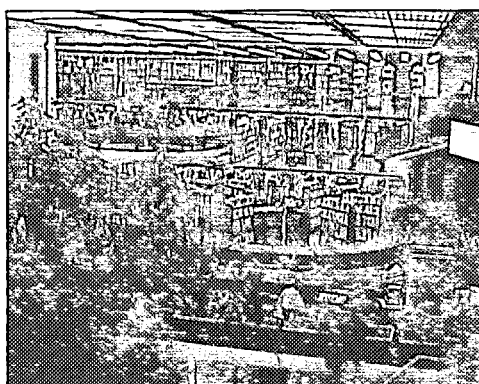
When you read this, spring is likely to at least be flirting with you, wherever you are.

Perhaps, if you live in one of the warmer zones, you've even given up the preseason of lingering over seed catalogs inside and have ventured outdoors to watch perennials emerge from the earth. As I write this, snow fills my backyard instead of snowdrops (*Galanthus* spp.), and there's no sign of either multicolored crocus (*Crocus* spp.) or deep-blue Siberian squill (*Scilla siberica*) to hint at the blooms that will eventually fill the garden. As the poet John Milton once complained in Sonnet VII, "But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th."

Librarians and patrons at the Washoe County (Nev.) Public Library in Reno need not suffer from late-winter malaise. There is a garden within the public library downtown that first opened to the public in May 1966, according to Periodicals Assistant Kim Raines, who describes herself as "keeper of the clipping files and also of the library's archives on itself."

"There are over 1,300 plants, according to one of our (older, I'll admit) brochures," Raines told *American Libraries*. "I imagine there are at least 100 varieties, with most of them being your standard corn plants, spider plants, philodendrons, etc., not to mention a ficus that is 40 feet tall and looks like a tree in someone's yard. There is also an avocado tree, donated by someone who grew it from a pit, that reaches almost to the ceiling (four stories)," she said. The garden includes a fountain, and after some trial and error, now contains plants that are not challenged by Reno's dry, high-desert climate.

Library Manager Scottie Wallace related an anecdote about the garden. "The legend I was told when I got here was that the designer of this building wanted to build this building inside a park, and he wasn't able to . . . so he put the park inside the library," Wallace said.



Washoe County Public Library's elegant interior garden.

Head of Reference Barbara Kaufman, a 24-year veteran of the library, credits Hewitt C. Wells of Reno as the building architect, and Mitchell Serven and Associates as the landscapers. She describes the effect as simply "beautiful."

Others have acknowledged the library's distinctiveness as well. As Kaufman explained, "The American Association of Nurserymen presented the library with one of its 1966 Industrial Landscape Awards, presented by Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson."

The resulting library informs and delights staff and patrons alike. "We get many tourists who exclaim it is the most beautiful library they have ever seen," Raines noted, adding "I have a calendar from a Texas oil drilling association from about 1970 . . . which is a calendar celebrating the 'World's Most Beautiful Libraries,' and we are in it."

Raines told the story of her own

introduction to the library. "When I first came into this building, which would have been 1966 or 1967 (I was born in Reno), I told my mother I wanted to live here. Now I almost do!" Raines said. "I have a friend who feels the same way. It is very peaceful," she added.

Despite their appreciation of the garden, librarians do not have to take on watering and nonbook weeding responsibilities. "We outsource the care of plants to a gentleman and his wife who come in once a week to water and trim," Wallace explained.

"When the gardeners would come in and trim and top some of the greenery, the staff used to get some of the clippings for starters for their own homes—I have several of the corn plants that were pruned from our library," Kaufman said.

In 1967, a columnist for the *Reno Nevada State Journal* recounted local quips about the "Washoe Botanical Gardens" and patrons not being able to "see the books for the bush." In the end, the columnist decided that "the library has flourished among its shrubs, vines, and plants, and more people than ever are pleased with books among the greenery." These favorable attitudes have persisted almost 40 years, perhaps proving Cicero's claim: "If you have a garden and library, you have everything you need." ♦

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