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# **Plantosaurus Rex**

## **Prehistoric Plants at the Conservatory of Flowers**

**May 10 – October 21, 2012**

**SAN FRANCISCO** -- Step back in time ... WAY back in time as the Conservatory of Flowers transports you to a real life land of the lost in its newest exhibition *Plantosaurus Rex* on view May 10 – October 21, 2012. It's a prehistoric paradise of plants from the time of the dinosaurs when giant ferns, spiky horsetails, and primitive cycads grew in lush abundance and fed many of the monstrous reptiles that roamed the earth millions of years ago. Under a canopy of primordial conifers, visitors encounter model dinosaurs like the armored *Stegosaurus* foraging for the vegetation they loved best while learning about the symbiotic relationship between ancient flora and fauna. But beware — the predators have come to Golden Gate Park too! A giant *T. rex* has smashed through the roof of the Conservatory to look for potential snacks!

Inside the exhibition, a path through the past takes the curious on a fascinating journey along the timeline of plant evolution during the Mesozoic Era (approx. 250 – 65 million years ago) as the arid and barren supercontinent Panagaea broke up into the multiple continents we know today, bringing more water and humidity inland and giving rise to an explosion of plant and animal life.

The exhibition begins in the Triassic Period, the first of the Mesozoic Era's three periods, dating from approx. 250 to 205 million years ago. Both the start and end of the period were marked by major extinction events, but in between life on earth began to change dramatically. In the earliest part of the Triassic, plant life clung to the shores of Pangaea, surviving the hot, dry climate by sticking close to the water. Visitors are introduced to some of the major plant groups of the day including ferns, cycads, and lycopods (club mosses).

Animals depended on this sparse vegetation to rebound from the devastating extinction. Insect populations began to recover including many giant varieties, which persisted from the earlier Permian Period like the predatory *Meganeura*, a massive dragonfly-like creature with a wingspan of over 2 feet. Visitors encounter a model of one of these monster bugs in this area of the exhibition, coming face to face with the biggest insect that ever lived.

Primitive plants also supported the very first dinosaurs and mammals, which all made their appearance during the Triassic, but it was not until the more famous Jurassic Period that both flora and fauna really experienced a population boom. Also known as the “Age of Reptiles,” the Jurassic (approx. 206 to 144 million years ago) was the heyday of the dinosaurs, and plants made life possible for these gargantuan reptiles.

It was during the Jurassic that the great supercontinent Panagaea experienced a major rift and split in two. All of this newly formed coastline, coupled with a warmer, wetter climate that gave rise to inland seas and lakes, created the perfect environment for plants to thrive. Once parched deserts became lush rainforests. The dominant land plant species of the time were gymnosperms, non-flowering, fruitless seed plants including *Ginkgo* and conifers like *Araucaria* which grew in abundance and are a feature of this area of the exhibition along with another important dinosaur food, horsetails. Horsetails were an important source of nutrition for the dinosaurs. Fast growing and resilient, these spiky plants, like many others of this period, survived the oversized grazers by resprouting from rhizomes or underground stems. Here visitors encounter one of the great herbivores of the dinosaur world, an impressive 7-foot long baby *Stegosaurus*, back bristling with armored plates and head low to the ground to munch on favorite plants.

As dinosaur populations continued to grow and diversify, many new species evolved to prey on others. To illustrate this point, visitors also encounter one of the most notorious carnivores of the Jurassic, the bipedal *Allosaurus*, an efficient killer with a massive skull, plenty of sharp teeth, small, slashing claws, and a long tail.

The third and final section of the exhibition takes visitors into the Cretaceous Period (approx. 144 – 65 million years ago), and it is here that they encounter one of the most defining moments

of plant evolution, the emergence of angiosperms or flowering plants. It was about 140 million years ago that the first flowers appeared, and soon they would dominate the landscape. In an increasingly competitive environment, plants needed faster and more efficient ways to reproduce. Flowers and fruit provided an enticing way to enlist the animal population into this task, moving pollen from plant to plant and after eating, disseminating seeds far and wide. A rapidly building humus layer of decomposing plant material and animal droppings helped speed evolution along as well, providing a surplus of nutrients for these new plants that lived, reproduced, and died in short, productive life cycles. It was a vibrant and accelerated world, and some of its pioneers included orchids, water lilies, and magnolias, all featured in the exhibition.

Dinosaurs benefited, of course, from this veritable vegetative feast and continued to evolve during this period. More of them took wing like the pterodactyl, which had existed as early as the Triassic but thrived during the Cretaceous. Visitors can see one of these impressive creatures soaring overhead. Predatory dinosaurs were on the rise as well, including the most famous of all, the *Tyrannosaurus rex*. The great ‘tyrant lizard king’ was the largest carnivore in its environment, weighing more than 7 tons on average. In fact, the Conservatory’s 23-foot tall *T. rex* will be the first thing visitors see on their approach to the famed old greenhouse, its head bursting through the roof of the building to look out over Golden Gate Park for “potential prey.”

If visitors avoid *T. rex*’s gaze and actually make it to the door, they will all receive a free booklet guide with paid admission to help them navigate this fascinating evolution of prehistoric plants complete with exhibit activity suggestions for young paleontologists. Docents will also regularly be on hand to share fossil specimens and answer questions, and visitors to the Conservatory can also opt to take a free tour on most days at 11:00 a.m., 12:30 p.m., and 2:30 p.m. depending on docent availability.

Media sponsors for *Plantosaurus Rex* include KQED Public Broadcasting, KTVU, Red Tricycle, and the San Francisco Examiner.

***Plantosaurus Rex* is open Tuesdays – Sundays from 10 am to 4 pm and is included with admission to the Conservatory. Admission for San Francisco residents (with proof of**

residency) is \$5 general; \$3 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$1.50 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. Admission for non-residents is \$7 general, \$5 youth 12-17, seniors and students with ID; \$2 children 5-11; children 4 and under FREE. The public should call (415) 831-2090 or visit [www.conservatoryofflowers.org](http://www.conservatoryofflowers.org) for more information.

### **Background**

The Conservatory of Flowers is a spectacular living museum of rare and beautiful tropical plants under glass. From Borneo to Bolivia, the 1,750 species of plants at the Conservatory represent unusual flora from more than 50 countries around the world. Immersive displays in five galleries include the lowland tropics, highland tropics, aquatic plants, potted plants and special exhibits. Opened in 1879, the wood and glass greenhouse is the oldest existing conservatory in North America and has attracted millions of visitors to Golden Gate Park since it first opened its doors. It is designated as a city, state and national historic landmark and was one of the 100 most endangered sites of the World Monuments Fund.

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