

# New Labeling of Plants at the UCR Botanic Gardens

*J. Giles Waines*

The University of California Riverside Botanic Gardens occupy 39 acres of rugged, hilly terrain along the eastern boundary of the UCR campus. Literally a “living museum,” the Gardens offer an exhibition of more than 3,500 species and cultivars from around the world. The numerous microclimates created by the combination of variable terrain and Riverside’s subtropical climate allows an impressive diversity of cultivated plants, with the greatest numbers coming from California and Australia. Displaying tropical figs, cypress relatives, myrtle relatives, roses, bearded iris, herbs, cacti, succulents, subtropical fruits and many other plant family and horticultural groupings, this is the only collection of its type available locally to residents, students and researchers in the Inland Empire, the population of which exceeds two million.

## The Plant-Labeling Problem

Public education is one of the mandates of the UCR Botanic Gardens, but the Gardens’ original plant labeling system hindered this. It needed to be standardized, corrected, repaired and replaced. Many of the labels identifying plants throughout the Gardens were as much as 24 years old and had deteriorated badly from weather and other pressures through the years. With lettering that was too small, cracked and faded, they were difficult to read, especially by older people. Moreover, there were at least three styles of labels, and information was inconsistent or misleading. The Gardens needed to settle on one standard system with a consistent format. Creation of new labels which would provide more information written more clearly would heighten the collection’s value to both the scientific community and the public.

## Revamping the System

The Elvenia J. Slosson Foundation generously supported a special three-year project that involved all phases of updating the aged labeling system. For each of the more than 5,000 labeled plants the botanical names were verified, and basic information, such as plant family, native origin and common name, was researched by the curator and a staff member hired with Slosson funds. Since labels contain an accession number which refers

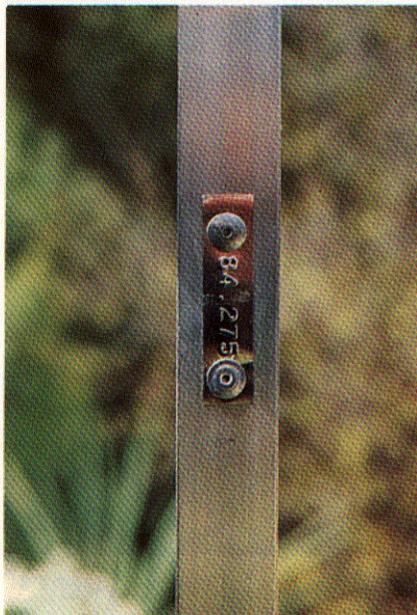
those interested to a plant’s source, planting record and other useful information kept on file, the Gardens’ records were also checked and updated.

The Slosson staff person then engraved selected information onto two-tone, green and white plastic labels in one of several standard formats. An identical backup label was cut at the same time to be kept on file to allow quick replacement if a field label became damaged. The labels were then backed with protective aluminum plates and riveted to aluminum stakes angled at the top to best display the text. An aluminum tape embossed with the plant’s accession number was riveted to the back of each stake for quick identification, should the public display label be damaged. Each assembled label placed in the Gardens was then set in a concrete footing.

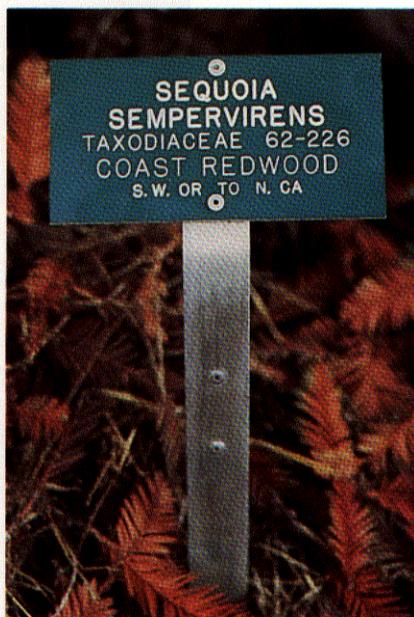
For trees growing in lawn areas where stake labels would be subject to mower damage, the labels were attached directly to the trunks after being fitted with metal washers and springs to hold them away from the trunks and allow for growth. The screws on these labels are adjusted annually. The approximate cost of each label was \$3.50 for materials, plus the cost of labor for research, engraving, assembly and installation.

The label format was designed after project personnel conducted a study of labels and interpretive materials at many other botanical gardens, arboreta and other facilities. The various possibilities were evaluated in light of the purposes and goals of the UCR Botanic Gardens. The new standardized label has the complete scientific name of the plant listed first, in the largest, boldest typeface. For plants of horticultural origin this may include a cultivar name. Depending on the length of the scientific name, more than one line may be used in order to maintain the large typeface. Listed second, in smaller type, is the scientific family name, followed on the same line by the plant’s accession number. For labels of short-lived plants accession numbers are attached to the stakes but are not engraved on the public portion of the label, thus allowing reuse of the label for new accessions of that species. Below that, in quotation marks, is the plant’s common name in a large but not bold typeface. The last line of the label gives the plant’s native geographical range or origin.

Labels in the Herb Garden follow a slightly different format, since herbs are known primarily by their common names and the plants’ uses are a major consideration. Also, plants in some of the horticultural collections, such as roses, irises and daylilies, have an abbreviated label that does not include the family name or origin.



Accession number on back of stake.



Plastic-on-aluminum label attached to aluminum stake provides legible and tasteful design.



Marker for self-guided tour.

During the three-year grant period, approximately 7,600 labels were researched and engraved. About 5,000, or two thirds, of those were assembled and installed in place, and now provide on-site information for the public, with verified records available in the files. The other third of the labels are stored in an alphabetical drawer system for quick replacement of any that are damaged in the field. An interpretive display at the entrance to the Gardens will present a sample label and describe the labeling system.

### Benefits for Homeowners, Gardeners and Landscapers

Visitors to the Gardens include homeowners, students, landscapers, nursery people and researchers, and this huge project has helped make the Botanic Gardens collections more valuable to all. A collection of properly labeled plants allows visitors on their own to observe and study plants in the areas of their particular interest. Since low-water-use plantings are a style of gardening that has become more popular in Southern California, accurately labeled plants aid homeowners wishing to see the Gardens' extensive collection of drought-tolerant plants.

The new labels also clearly identify local examples of endangered species such as *Berberis nevii*, Nevin's barberry, and *Rosa minutifolia*, the Baja desert rose, promoting public awareness of conservation issues. Small research grants to investigate those two taxa were funded by the Hardman Foundation.

The eleven garden organizations that regularly meet at the Gardens are: the Rancho Rose Society, Riverside Rose Society, UC Master Gardeners, Inland Bonsai Society, Inland Bromeliad Society, Inland Empire Herb Society, California Rare Fruit Growers (Inland Chapter), California Native Plant Society (Riverside/San Bernardino Chapter), Victoria Garden Club, the Riverside Garden Club and the Inland Begonia Society. Some of these groups provide financial or other help to specific areas in the Gardens, such as herbs, roses, and rare fruits. Clear and well-maintained labels in those specialty areas encourage repeated visits and continued support.

The new labeling system has also enhanced the utility of two special brochures, the extensive "Outdoor Classroom" Self-Guided Tour, which was financed by U.C. Cooperative Extension, and the "Trees of China" Self-guided Tour. In addition, it allowed the creation of two new self-guided tours and accompanying brochures financed by instructional improvement grants — the "Deserts of the Southwest" Self-Guided Tour, designed primarily for undergraduates, and a "Guide to the Cycad Collection and Geodesic Dome Lathhouse" (in press).

More than 40,000 visitors viewed the Gardens in 1989, and that number increases annually. Classes from local schools involved in horticulture and botany visit regularly, with nearly 70 school groups touring the premises in 1990. The arrival of more groups and school tours stimulated the formation of a docent program.

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Additionally, the Slosson Foundation grant inspired the Friends of the UCR Botanic Gardens to provide partial funding for a computerized label engraver, which greatly reduces the time involved in cutting labels. The effective educational value of the new labeling system will continue to generate more public interest and help extend the University's horticultural knowledge and expertise to the general public.

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