

Nuts and Bolts

If You Must.....

by James P. Folsom

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Almost nothing good can come of using living plants as memorials, either for fundraising or for collections development. If you must, if your organization simply is driven to use living plants as honorifics or memorials, I can imagine a few circumstances in which living memorials could function, perhaps even thrive. But from my own encounters and conversations over the last thirty years, if your organization has no better strategy to raise funds and recognize gifts, then you have reached the bottom of the idea barrel.

So, When Is It Right?

When would designating living plants as memorials be a purposeful solution?

When the Memorial Is the Purpose

I have known of groves of trees that were envisioned, from the beginning, as memorials. This is about as good as it gets. With everyone is sold on the purpose and permanence of the plantings, the only hazards are death and destruction, or a complete change in purpose for the site. In this situation, living plants become stand-ins for people to be remembered—people whose stories will resonate for audiences a hundred years hence. And you get a nice bosque as well.

When the Memorial Protects Valuable, Long-Lived Specimens

And most of us know of groves so precious we want to preserve them as living artifacts. Think General Sherman in the Giant Forest of Sequoia National Park. I, personally, would be delighted to have a giant redwood in a permanently protected national park designated as my memorial—and would be forgiving when, after twenty or so thousand years,

the grand specimen itself succumbed. I wouldn't even need to have a bronze plaque at the base; just knowing it is there would be good enough. But it would only be really good if the memorial itself were based on a financial gift that helped to advance the care, purpose, and value of the grove. The same could be said for any planted site at which trees or other long-lived plants are crucial and permanent elements in the landscape.

When It Builds a Unique, Long-Lived Collection

We individually recognize Bonsai specimens at The Huntington, which is the single exception to our policy for publically memorializing living plants. The reasoning behind this parallels the manner in which museums deal with donated art pieces. In the case of bonsai, we actively seek and add pieces to the collection that we are really excited to cultivate and display. Sometimes these specimens come as solicited gifts; other times they are in bequests. We do not accept bonsai trees as part of the collection unless they are display-worthy and of direct value to the exhibition. Usually, the owner, artist, and donor are the same person (or family), so the memorial itself becomes part of the interpreted story.

When the Living Memorial Is Not Individually Identified and Plaqued

Once a long-term plan truly confirms that a planting (collection or not) perfectly and absolutely suits the needs of the site, and a long-term commitment sings in concert with mission, then plantings reflected in a single memorial roster (stone, bronze, print, or virtual format) could provide real opportunities to recognize the

many people interested in the places and purposes that define the institution. By this formula, the institution could avoid tying exact specimens to individuals being memorialized, serving both the institution and potential donors.

There are many possible variants in this circumstance. As a graduate student at Vanderbilt, I was delighted to learn that a donor-created endowment supported the labeling of trees on campus. Each year students were hired to replace and adjust the signage. Though not even mentioned on the plaques, it would have been nice, actually, if the name of the fund supporting that program had been included on the plaques, along with the tree identification. I would like to have known who cared so much.

When the Living Plant is Obviously Short-Lived, and to Be Replaced Regularly

If it is possible to use what is, essentially, a changing exhibit as a memorial opportunity, that could be perfect. For example, a modest gift could underwrite a bed of annuals for a season, or the year. An endowment gift might be negotiated that would fund the planting on an on-going basis. Churches use a similar formula for altar flowers and special occasions, listing the gifts and memorials in a bulletin or on a placard. At least one art gallery in the U.S. was given an endowment to keep fresh flower arrangements in exhibitions perpetually (to me, this means forever).

When the Gift Is Substantial and Permanent Enough to Make it Worthwhile

Everyone has his/her price. Given a decision that a certain plant is perfect for its space and the purpose of the

garden, and given sufficient endowment support to make a difference in funding the institution, as well as to restore or replace the designated living plant in the event of catastrophic loss, I would go for it. This could happen in any manifestation. A large endowment gift or significant founding individual could be memorialized by the institution, knowing that leadership would abandon or redesignate a living memorial in the event the specimen dies. Or a new donor might be recognized by designating an existing, important specimen as a wonderful act of memory-making. But in these cases, nothing is being sold. The institution is making a statement using a living specimen.

What Are the Hazards?

Money Is the Root of all Evil

To me, the hazards of living plants used as memorials relate to purpose. If designation of living memorials relates purely to fundraising, there have to be better options. People have very normal and non-institutional opinions about giving money for plants. They usually think that the immediate challenge is the purchase of the plant itself, and may ask “how much does a specimen cost?” The complication is that cost of a single plant is one of the lesser concerns. In a landscape, unless the plan calls for incredibly rare or massive boxed specimens, cost of the plants proves one of the more manageable components. The big gifts are needed for land purchase, design and construction, landscaping, maintenance, and interpretation. The donor recognition program needs to manage those larger needs and expectations. In the flow of red ink that flushes out a capital project, the cost of a

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single small tree or rose or camellia may be a drop in the bucket. But it is common for donors to imagine that if they give the cost of a plant that solves the need at hand.

Nothing Is Forever

Yet people have great expectations of memorials. I have been told by some curators that “permanent” means 20 years and by others that “in memory of...” means 10 years. That may be clearly stated, in writing and in print, but I believe most reasonable people will still assume that a living memorial actually survives for a much longer time. Minimally, I believe that in the lifespan of people who make the gift creating the memorial, there is the clear expectation that on some future personal visit, they will be able to view a handsome, healthy specimen.

Death, Where Is Thy Sting?

Of course, plants die. Even worse perhaps, they sometimes linger but fail to prosper. Most cruelly, they may be poorly selected, or in the eyes of new management, improperly sited. If the gift for the memorial just covered the cost of a plant and a plaque, we have a problem. Donors do not expect an institution to be so inept as to let a plant die, or select the wrong plant, or install a plant in the wrong place. Donors certainly do not expect to receive a call from staff to inform them that a decision has been made to eliminate memorial plants because a new generation of management has different thoughts as to how an area might be used. I know of two instances in which this has happened in recent days.

Lacking a Plan, Any Idea Is a Good One

Maybe worse than death or poor decision-making, I have talked with parks as well as gardens directors who inherited memorial plantings that were purely instigated by the donors. Just this past month I talked with a manager whose predecessors had allowed planting of memorial trees by a community organization with the hope this would create a bond and an avenue for future support, which never materialized. Wow! No institution should speculate with living memorials. But worse yet, in this situation the donors selected both the plants and the location. Collections or landscape policies should pro-actively discourage such possibilities, in order to protect staff from inappropriate and dysfunctional pressure. More importantly, memorial plantings made outside an overall plan are bound for trouble as the sparks fly upward. You shouldn't have to make ad hoc decisions about long term investments.

The Devil Is in the Details

Installing individual plaques to memorialize living plants is a nightmare, at almost every level. It is difficult enough to maintain recognition programs for significant gifts in the landscape, and just keeping nice, useful identification labels on individual plants requires considerable effort and dedication. Adding yet another layer of on-going and unrelated management, maintenance, and cost to what is nearly always an underfunded and understaffed garden program is a formula for disaster. Moreover, giving recognition in the landscape for modest financial gifts related to plants can wreak havoc with an institution's overall recognition program. If recognition is the driving

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force for the gift, why would a donor invest several thousand dollars for a bench or fountain when a plaque can be placed on a tree for much less? And what about the most generous donors: people who freely make much larger contributions with no expectation for associated plaques or memorials? How is their good support affected when lesser gifts gain more formal recognition?

The Worst of Times

About 25 years ago, I remember talking with the collections curator at a regional garden about their memorial plant program. I was told that the garden had over 400 gifts that had been made as living memorials, without any organized records being kept. If donors actually came to examine the plant that had been witness to the memorial gift, staff would have no idea what to show them. That conversation was seminal for me. As a consequence, we have accepted very few plants as memorial gifts for the gardens in general, and then only under the proviso that designation would reside in the accession record alone. Even then, I feel an obligation to replace plants that fail.

How Would an Institution Mitigate Future Problems?

The way I have come to think about risk inherent in working with living plants is to begin with the worst case scenario, imagining the most unpleasant and irreconcilable fallout of the bargain being offered. Thinking forward to that uncomfortable moment when, as Gardens Director, I would have to inform some donor or family or news reporter that the living record of a precious memory no longer exists, I then look back to what we might have done to avoid the worst

outcome. It all boils down to refusing to make promises you can't keep. Better to disappoint someone honestly, up front, than to fail to live up to your side of the bargain.

In general, that means I would avoid promising individual plaques on living plants. This decision must be detailed *a priori* in policies or procedures, so that individual requests can be managed without setting new precedents or angering important donors. If plaques are necessary, an aggregate plaque for the general area, or a special mention on the central donor wall would be far easier to manage. Eliminate as many levels of record-keeping, monument-creation, and special work as possible. If you must, if I have failed to convince you to avoid tracking living memorials, then create the simplest, most fail-proof system possible. My favorite would be an old-fashioned, dedicated bound (not loose-leaf) journal—like a guest register. I would record the information, have the donor sign, and continue to build a sweet legacy that defies changes in operating systems.

Link living plants to more permanent objects. For smaller gifts, perhaps a donor could be interested in a named bench that is placed in the vicinity of a favorite tree or other planting. For larger landscape features, living plant recognition might be included with that of the hardscape. “Rhodendrons Planted in Honor of ...”

Have an overall strategy that realistically accounts for the costs and purposes of living memorials. This may include a replacement strategy, which suggests that plants worthy of memorials are also plants the institution would always hope to have

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in the landscape. Most powerfully, a living memorial might be tied to a permanent endowment. If you are fortunate to go this route, then institutional policy and strategy on endowments must be clearly understood by any staff conducting conversations about memorials. Is the endowment to be unrestricted, or is the institution comfortable with restricted endowments related to the memorial? How are gift instructions worded both to fulfill the wishes of the donor as well as to leave freedom for long term use and management by the institution? Perhaps the institution would create a single endowment for living memorials, into which all related donations are deposited and tracked. Funds from that endowment might underwrite care and management,

as well as replacement or relocation.

Do not assume that every donor demands permanent recognition for modest gifts. Do not sell your program too cheaply. The people who most support your mission are quite likely least interested in littering the landscape with small plaques. If you must, if you are going to do this despite my every attempt to convince you otherwise, then do not assume all memorial gifts focus on people who have died. The best time to do a memorial for someone is while he or she still lives. Then you and the donors can enjoy the moment together, photos can be taken, records kept. The people memorialized take on new potential as donors themselves. ✨