

Episode 102: Minnesota Landscape Arboretum's retiring director and history

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Arboretum Director Peter Moe plans to retire later this year. Stella Mehlhoff met with Moe and Dr. David Remucul of the Landscape Arboretum to learn the impact the Arboretum has had on both Minnesotans and state plant life.



by Stella Mehlhoff

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INTRO MUSIC

STELLA MEHLHOFF: Hello, my name is Stella Mehlhoff, and you're listening to "In the Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily. Our aim is to explore a new aspect of the University of Minnesota's students and communities with each episode. This week, we're featuring the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

According to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum's website, the Arboretum was founded on 160 acres of land given to the University of Minnesota in 1958. Today, the arboretum has expanded to 1,200 acres, with almost 390,000 visitors each year. The arboretum's mission, as stated on their Mission & History page, is "to welcome, inform, and inspire all through outstanding displays, protected natural areas, horticultural research, and education."

On June 10, 2022, director of the arboretum, Peter Moe, announced his plans to retire later this year after a six year tenure. Moe and the arboretum hope to find his replacement soon, marking a point of transition for the arboretum.

For his MN Daily interview, Moe asks to sit on a shady bench within the gardens. He crosses his fingers while we talk, doesn't make much eye contact, and smiles often. A bug crawls on his shoulder, but he doesn't seem to mind. Moe joined the arboretum staff as a student gardener in 1973.

PETER MOE: I was out here in the summer, and uh, and saw a crew working and asked if there were any openings. And there happened to be somebody, that was their last day and I started the next day. So I've been here ever since.

MEHLHOFF: Some of Moe's responsibilities included driving tractors, dividing peonies, spreading wood chips, and chopping elm trees.

MOE: If you're a part-time seasonal worker, you're just kind of a – you're not the most important person. And I didn't expect to be, but all of a sudden I came out here and just the way everybody treated everyone else I thought was just better than any place I'd worked previously.

MEHLHOFF: Moe's connection with the arboretum goes beyond his career. He met his wife while working with the Azalea collection.

MOE: When we met there, we were colleagues for quite a while, but then, um, at some point we started dating and ended up getting married. We bought a house just a mile and a half from the arboretum. I rode my bike here this morning.

MEHLHOFF: And it's no wonder Moe wanted to stay close by – the arboretum is covered in natural wonders. According to the arboretum website, it boasts over 5,000 species of plants in its many gardens. Moe has a hard time picking out his favorite spot.

MOE: I absolutely love the Blooming Northern Lights Azaleas. But, but I also, when my family comes out here, whatever is really at its peak, at that time in May on Mother's Day, we'll go to the crab apples and lilacs. On Memorial Day, we'll go to see the Azaleas, and in June, we'll see the peonies and um roses. And so um, I like 'em all.

MEHLHOFF: The arboretum also serves as a center for horticultural research. In 2013, the arboretum launched the Plant Conservation Program. According to an email provided by the arboretum's media team, the program aims "to promote the conservation of rare and native plants of Minnesota." The program executes this goal by maintaining a long-term seed bank dedicated to species preservation, researching re-introduction strategies, and rescuing endangered plant species. Dr. David Remucal, Curator of Endangered Plants, describes some of the species he's working with.

DAVID REMUCAL: Minnesota has a lot of really cool plants. We've got native cacti, we've got native orchids, we've got native carnivorous plants: all three of which are really interesting, and all three of which most people in Minnesota don't realize we have.

MEHLHOFF: Remucal explains why being able to display the plants at the arboretum is beneficial.

REMUCAL: It's more about showing people these are some really cool plants in Minnesota, uh, trying to convince them that they should care about them. And as an extension about rare plants in general.

MEHLHOFF: Remucal adds ...

REMUCAL: It's something that plant conservation folks have had to fight for a while, is to fight for this sort of emotional, mental space in people's hearts and minds.

MEHLHOFF: When asked why conservation is important, Remucal offers his perspective.

REMUCAL: If you're losing a species, you're losing a bit of history, you're losing a bit of both local history and global history. Um, there are species that have been going extinct for millions of years, millions of years before people came around. But it seems, um, it seems like it's been shown that, that extinction rate is really accelerated with people around. So we're causing things to go extinct that normally wouldn't go extinct. And so we are losing, we're sort of causing some history to disappear and for Minnesotan specifically, we're potentially causing pieces of Minnesota to disappear.

MEHLHOFF: As we leave the greenhouse, Remucal pauses, trying to decide what plant to tell about next. He gestures to a few small pots and then hesitates.

REMUCAL: No, that's fine. There's a story behind that. All of our plants have a story, but at some point we gotta kind of, move on.

MEHLHOFF: Moe echoes this sentiment.

MOE: We're a, like a living book here, of seeing everywhere you look you can see plants.

So we really want to show people the potential. A lot of times people, especially if they move here from a southern state, they just think, 'oh, I can't grow anything in Minnesota,' and we show that's not true.

MEHLHOFF: The arboretum is busy the day of our conversation. People of all ages have come to see the changing fall leaves and wander the gardens. Two visitors, Kristin Cherkaski and Sophie Shears, describe their experience at the arboretum.

KRITSIN CHERKASKI: Uh, I just moved here literally like three days ago from California. But she is.

SOPHIE SHEARS: Yeah, I grew up here.

MEHLHOFF: Cool. What brought you here?

CHERKASKI: Uh, her. That's my girlfriend. We're moving in together.

MEHLHOFF: Why did you guys decide to come to the arboretum today?

SHEARS: It's my favorite place in Minnesota probably, Um and it's the place I would've taken her on our first date.

CHERKASKI: And I feel like we were, we wanted to plan coming here like in Autumn when the leaves would be changing, so that might be the tradition from now on.

MEHLHOFF: Vibrant roses surround the couple as we speak.

CHERKASKI: I feel like we came at exactly the right time 'cause everything is still blooming, but the trees are starting to change, so it's like the best of both worlds.

MEHLHOFF: As the arboretum and its visitors are looking forward, Remucal expresses his hopes for the arboretum's search for a new director.

REMUCAL: Hopefully we're gonna have somebody good. Um, and there are certainly people who exist already that I think would be very good directors, uh, as the next director. But not all directors that come in have a history with the garden they're working with.

MEHLHOFF: At the end of our interview, as I prepare to leave the horticultural research center, Remucal makes a comment on Moe's retirement.

REMUCAL: He's given so much to the institutional knowledge of this place. Losing him is gonna be, in a lot of ways losing sort of a big heart of the arboretum, just because he's known so much of what's gone on out here, been involved with so much that. He will be greatly missed.

MEHLHOFF: Don't forget your helmet.

MOE: Oh thank you, Stella. You're welcome to look around as much as you want.

MEHLHOFF: Yeah, will do.

MEHLHOFF: The arboretum grounds are open to visitors from 8 am to 7 pm. According to their website, tickets are free for University of Minnesota students and can be reserved by calling their ticketing number, 612-301-6775 or by going online at arb.umn.edu/tickets.

Thank you for listening. We're glad you're tuning in this fall. Don't forget to like and rate In the Know wherever you get your podcasts. My name is Stella Mehlhoff, and this is In the Know.