An Interview with Fred Hoyt
Reflecting on a 38-Year Career at the Arboretum and Center for Urban Horticulture

By Jason Morse

At the end of January, 2021, UW Botanic Gardens Director and Orin and Althea Soest Chair for Urban Horticulture Fred Hoyt retired after an accomplishment-filled career at the Arboretum and Center for Urban Horticulture. In early February, I spoke to Fred via Zoom and asked him to share some of his memories from the last four decades, as well as his hopes for the future of our beautiful Arboretum.

JM: Fred, I read in a post on the UW Botanic Gardens blog that you went to the University of Idaho and studied plant science. Can you talk about how you ended up there and chose this field?

FH: I grew up in California and, after graduating from high school, was accepted at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, and quite a few other places. But, I decided on Idaho because my vision of the state was from when my Dad and I, and his best friend, used to go up to Sun Valley and fish the Wood River and the Copper River Basin. Pretty idyllic! It was also a way to get away from my parents!

I started off as a forestry major, but that began to not appeal to me, so I switched to...
landscape architecture and quickly realized you have to draw better than I can draw. I went into plant sciences with a major in landscape horticulture, and that really stuck with me. My father being a science teacher really put me on the road to this. He has a Masters in botany as well. Also, my uncle was on the faculty at WSU for 30–plus years as an entomologist, and he ran the Wenatchee Research Station. So, it’s always been in my DNA, so to speak.

I remember my grandfather: He had plants, too. He was an electrical engineer by training and involved in building dams in California. He set up his garden with a hose in the top planting well and engineered it so that he didn’t have to pick the hose up and move it. Just like a dam system, the water would overflow down into each subsequent well for all his plants.

Before I started university, I always had jobs working for my girlfriends’ parents—mowing lawns, taking care of their pool, pruning around the outside—even though I didn’t really know what I was doing then.

**JM:** Since you grew up in California, part of the answer to my next question might be that you had the same long hairstyle back then as you have now, during COVID... But, what would surprise us most about the Fred Hoyt we would have encountered in the Arboretum 38 years ago?

**FH:** I was very shy, in a way. I did not like being in the spotlight. I did not like public speaking. And I wasn’t comfortable in large groups. I grew up in a small town in California, and then went to the University of Idaho—which was not a major metropolitan area. Moving here was a big change, but becoming a gardener allowed me to be in the background somewhat.

**JM:** Surprises me, for sure, because you’re really comfortable talking in front of people. What are some of your favorite memories working as a gardener lead?

**FH:** My supervisor at the time was Dick Hart. He was an old logger and a gruff old guy, but he took a liking to me. We’d go into the crew rooms, and they’d be filled with smoke—and you’d come out, just like in the old bars, stinking of tobacco.

Dick taught me how to fell trees—the ones in the Arboretum that were hazardous or needed to be removed for collection purposes. Back in those days, we didn’t climb trees to lower them because we didn’t have the equipment. We used block and tackle, with a tractor. We had to figure out how to lay the tree down on a particular trail or in between some plants. Dick taught me how to do it—how to look at the tree, understand the nature of the challenge, and how you use the twist and cut the tree.

That’s a very good memory. Another big one was the diversity of the plants at the Arboretum. I thought I knew plants coming from Idaho, but I had no idea the palette of plants I’d be facing here. To learn the species and find out about them from the crew, it was just a big, eye-opening experience for me.

**JM:** What is your favorite place in the Arboretum, and why?

**FH:** You know, I don’t really have a favorite place. If I was to go there today, there are places that still surprise me. You think you know the Arboretum inside out, and then—all of a sudden—you’re in a spot you can’t remember ever having been. That surprise is always fun for me.

If I had to pick a particular spot, it wouldn’t be so much because of the location as the plants...
there—and that’s the stewartia grove. It’s just a gorgeous place to observe some truly gorgeous trees. Those are four-season plants, and our specimens are just outstanding.

Another spot that always intrigues me is the little area with the U-shaped path overlooking the New Zealand Forest—because of the vistas through there. You can see all the way to the University District! It can be truly magical at dusk!

**JM:** Pretty early in your career here, you moved over to the Center for Urban Horticulture (CUH) and got involved with planning and development of the plant-growth facilities there. Can you give us a little of history behind that?

**FH:** We didn’t have good plant-growing facilities at the Arboretum, but had the space at the CUH. Harold Tukey, the director at the time, wanted to establish an educational plant-growing facility. Through a lot of machinations and working with Jones & Jones and others, we came up with what is now the Douglas Research Conservatory. That’s really been a gem of a building, serving a lot of functions.

The process was long and hard, and we did it on the cheap. We were scrounging stuff for the facility out of what was then the old Health Sciences Building. Just pulling things together while thinking about the research and educational opportunities it could offer. We were also thinking about public use of the space. So, we put a nice classroom space in there, but one that was separated from the research space.

We also, through a generous donation from Orin and Althea Soest, were able to develop the Soest Garden, designed by Michaela Groeblacher. Iain Robertson, Jim Fiore and I did all the installation on that. That included the irrigation and the plants and whatnot. Iain and I did all the plantings in the McVay Courtyard and Goodfellow Grove, too. Iain not only designed some of these garden spaces but also helped install them. I have fond memories of all that.

I’ll tell you a little anecdotal story from back then. For the groundbreaking of the original Merrill Hall, I had to get the backhoe from the Arboretum and use it to dig up some of the ground because the soil was so hard you couldn’t stick a shovel in it. We had to loosen it up first, before the dignitaries could perform the ceremony.

**JM:** You were teaching in the UW’s continuing education program at the time, too. What classes did you teach?

**FH:** I taught a lot of pruning classes. It was something I took great pride in—to be able to prune a plant and have people tell me, “I can’t tell that you pruned that!” So, I wanted to pass along that knowledge. I taught a lot of greenhouse management courses as well.

**JM:** Was this around the time you started your family? Tell me about that and how you met your wife, Michelle.

**FH:** I moved to Seattle in the fall of 1981 and met Michelle a couple of months later at what
used to be Quinn’s out on Shilshole. It was a restaurant and disco at the time. I’d gotten a side job and had two of my friends over from Idaho to help with it, and I said I’d take them out to dinner. After dinner, we decided to drop into the disco—all wearing Levi jackets and grubby from the job. We went in there, I met Michele, and a week later she and I had a date. We were engaged within five months, got married on June 19, 1983, and have been together ever since.

Our son Justin was born in 1984, and our second son, Ian, in ’87. I had the opportunity to coach Little League baseball with my eldest for nine years. And with Ian, I coached City League basketball for eight years. I made the time to be with the kids a lot.

JM: You kind of followed in your dad’s footsteps with your career. What do your boys do? Are they in a similar field?

FH: No. I encouraged both of them to think about the business aspect of things. After getting a degree in English—and bartending for a while—Justin went to business school and now does international retail sales and product management for Leatherman Tools. After about a 10-year gap year, Ian also decided to go back to school. He wrote to us one day and said “Did you guys know I was good at math?” We said, “No, we got you special education because you were failing math in school.” He graduated with a degree in physics and now is doing business analytics for a small company called LeadsRX.

JM: Great!

FH: Very proud of my boys!

JM: I can tell! So, your role evolved over the years, and by 2001 you were in charge of the horticulture staff at both the CUH and the Arboretum. It sounds like it was kind of a return to something you’d been doing before, but with more responsibility.

FH: Yes. CUH had reached a point—due to funding—where we weren’t doing much more development. My background is maintenance and plants, and I always wanted to get back to the Arboretum. So I made a pitch, at some point, that if the opportunity came up I wouldn’t mind taking it on.

JM: You became the UW Botanic Gardens lead on the 520 bridge mitigation project. Any memories you’d like to share from that very intense process?

FH: Yes. I was recently archiving my files on this project, and some of my first meeting notes date back to 2003. We met a little bit at the Arboretum but were going down to the Wells Fargo building on a regular—almost weekly—basis for a while, meeting with all the folks involved to conjure up what this was going to look like, what the impacts would be. And that led to mitigation considerations and questions about where we could do mitigation. We reviewed a variety of sites. We wanted the mitigation to happen in the Arboretum, or as close to it as possible, to make amends for the damage that would be done.

So we selected the site that is now that new park just west of the UW hospital, and that was turned over to the City. We also selected the Union Bay Natural Area, and we’re still in the process of mitigation there—doing the restoration monitoring and maintenance. And, of course, the work we’ve been doing in the Arboretum with the Loop Trail, which I think has been one of the greatest things that’s happened there—as far as improving access. I think the number of visitors immediately went up by 50 percent, if not 100 percent, after installing that trail.
We also lost a lot. We lost a fair amount of land that was considered part of the Arboretum. We lost a lot of trees. But on the flip side, there are a couple of good things that happened along with the mitigation. We managed to get quite a bit of money for the trees that were in the old canal reserve area and around the old MOHAI building, and that money became an endowment that now funds our curator.

The same thing has happened with the Simon’s poplars along Lake Washington Boulevard at the north entry. We just made an agreement for $300,000 for the damage done and the removal of those iconic trees, and that money will be used for the Arboretum.

One of the highlights of my career has been working with the tribes. Relationships with them really kicked off for me with the SR 520 project, as the result of a couple of years of monthly lunches. It was a way to get to know each other, to develop trust. And all of a sudden, one day, we were doing business. I think what we came up with for what is now underneath the freeway, out on Foster Island, was full of respect for the ancestral land that is there. We felt the plant material and design were appropriate for that area.

JM: I grew up in Eastern Montana, where the Native American communities are centered around large, rural reservations. How is it different to work with these communities in a more urban context like Seattle?

FH: I can give you my impressions, having lived in other places where there are reservations. In Montana, those tracts of land are pretty much where those tribes always were. Here—and this is probably true in a lot of places—the reservation system involved moving people to a certain area, so that where the tribes live now isn’t necessarily their home territory. There were villages right here on Lake Washington, in the Arboretum and the Center for Urban Horticulture, but there’s nothing here now that indicates these are ancestral lands, and that’s the difference.

The ancestral part of it in urban areas is becoming more respected. Nowadays, in our meetings and at public events, we do a land acknowledgement. This is to make everyone aware that we are temporarily here as holders and caretakers of this land, and that there is another way to look at the world.

This holds personal significance for me. Where my dad built property in Northern California, there was a spring camp for one of the local bands; I’ve still got the arrowheads we collected. And, on the land, there were outcappings of granite where the Native American women used to grind acorns. You can get up on top of them and see the holes that they wore into the rock. This was not respected, because it was just sold off. It should have been set aside for something. As modern society develops on some of these lands, there has to be an acknowledgement back, and in urban areas we have to really start to put this forward.

JM: You’ve alluded to other cultural connections that are important to you—and I’m thinking about meat pies, Pacific Connections, and the Seattle Christchurch Sister City Association. Are there any other cultural encounters that have been important to you in the Arboretum?

FH: Yes, we’ve had a long, fruitful association with the local New Zealander community. But also, we have begun meeting with the folks from Australia and are having some discussions about the future focal forest.
I also have a special fascination with the Japanese culture. We did the ceremonial cherry planting on Azalea Way several years ago—but also just learning more about that culture from my niece, who moved over to Japan about eight years ago and is not coming back.

And through all the plant collections that we have in the Arboretum, you start to develop an affinity for the cultures. We have plants from all over the world, and from places people might not expect. From Vietnam, for example.

As we develop some of these gardens and forests, we automatically start to engage with peoples from those cultures.

**JM:** Last May, you received the Outstanding Community Impact award from the UW College of the Environment, acknowledging your work with many community groups outside of the UW. We also know that your work has involved some deep relationships with partner organizations. Do any of these partnerships stand out to you as having been particularly effective?

**FH:** I hesitate to say which ones because I don’t want to leave anyone out. What I will say is that getting to know people in these groups was really important and successful—establishing relationships in which you’re talking to people and not just between organizations. Like, Jason, you and me. We didn’t know each other at first, but we got to know each other and developed a friendship that makes working together so much better. And that was true of any of the other organizations, like the neighborhood group that came together over at Yesler Swamp. All the groups are important.

I have the impression that the relationships among some of the groups may not have worked so well in the past, that it was more adversarial. But we have so much more in common, and that’s what needs to be celebrated, what needs to be developed.

**JM:** Can you describe your most difficult moment during the time that you’ve been working here?

**FH:** I had two. First one was the 2001 fire at CUH and getting the call at five a.m. to say that your building’s burning down. Here’s me thinking that somebody threw something in a trash can, and that the fire was small. When I arrived, there were seven fire trucks! It didn’t hit me right away because I got so involved in trying to figure out what we needed to do, how we were going to move forward. A little later, I realized the impact of what had taken place. It was a personal thing that I had to work through myself—as did everyone else there. It had such a huge impact on us.

The other one was when Sarah Reichard passed. I was in California. I got a call from John Wott. He said “something’s wrong with Sarah, can you find out what’s going on?” I started calling around. Sarah’s husband, Brian, was over in South Africa with her, and he and I had numerous conversations throughout the night. He told me it was not looking good. It was very difficult. He called me in the morning to let me know that she has passed.

I worked with Stephanie Harrington on getting UW Global Affairs involved, and with moving her to Germany... All these things were going on. On the way to the airport the next day, Michelle drove, while I had to write an email to the staff, and it was so hard to write it. I kept asking Michelle, “Is this real?” We can’t just put something out like this and have it not be real. She reassured me that, yes, it was real and something I needed to do. That was very difficult.

**JM:** Those challenges must have been so difficult. But I know there have been a lot of good
times as well. Let me flip the script on you. What was the time that you laughed the hardest in your 38 years?

FH: That’s another one of those questions that’s hard to answer. I’ve had a lot of good laughs over the years. This is a fun field to work in, and I feel privileged to have worked in it. There are good people here. You and I have had some good chuckles. Jane Stonecipher—of the Arboretum Foundation—and I giggle together. It’s how it is with David Zuckerman, our horticulture manager. It’s how it was with Sarah. All the people I’ve ever been around. The staffs that we work with are just really good people—and genuine. There’s no phoniness in this. You don’t go into this arena with grandiose intentions but because you have a certain bent in life.

JM: So Fred, a lot of what I’ve worked on with you has been the Master Plan development—the physical development of the Arboretum. And it occurred to me how much converted soul—blood, sweat and tears—is in so many things that physically exist in the Arboretum. Are there any particular parts of this work that make you most proud? You already mentioned the Loop Trail.

FH: I’m going to step away from specifics because I think one of the things that pleases me the most is knowing that I’ve had an opportunity to work in an area that is providing a legacy—not for me. A lot of the things we’re working on are not going to come to maturation for another 50 years. From there on, you’re looking at something that could be serving the community for another 100, 200 or 300 years—just like some other botanic gardens around the world, which are quite old.

That leaves me with a very proud feeling—that I’ve had a hand in some of the work that we’ve done. From something as simple as putting in a particular tree to as large as developing the New Zealand Forest. I don’t know how many people—there may be a lot—get to be involved in something that has the longevity of the work we do.

JM: I’ve recently had the opportunity to work with you and others on an effort to imagine new ways for the UW Botanic Gardens, Seattle Parks and Recreation, and the Arboretum Foundation to work together. What advice would you give to those who will continue these discussions?

FH: Number one: be open-minded. The bigger picture is the most important thing. It’s up to our organizations to think about what’s best for this place as we move into the rest of the century. Don’t get caught up in all the details. We have to think big. It’s not that the details aren’t important, but it’s the goal that’s the real driver for us and should be the impetus behind how we perceive a feasibility study and so on. Don’t just think about what’s good for you. Think about what’s good for all.

We have three words that we work by: conservation, education and recreation. Those aren’t in any order. They’re all equal, and we have to keep them in mind as we move forward. In our meetings today, we are also prioritizing racial and social justice. These should permeate everything. They are part of conservation, part of recreation, part of education, and they need to be elevated in our discussions.

JM: In honor of your retirement, the Foundation has established the Fred Hoyt Botanical Exploration Fund [see page 22]. Why is this particular focus meaningful for you?

FH: I was extremely moved by this. The quote from Iain Robertson really made me step back and think… “Holy cow!” I told Jane yesterday that I’ve been going along doing my job all this time but haven’t thought about the impact that I’ve had. To have Iain say what he said was deeply
touching. The fund is an opportunity to get new collections of rare and unusual plants. Along with that, though, we will develop collaborations that are also very important.

Plant explorations and acquisitions will help with adaptation to climate change, and to answer questions such as, “Are we slowly moving toward being able to grow a wider range of plants?” And, of course, there’s the conservation aspect of acquiring new plants. We’re creating a germplasm here, and if something were to happen to a particular area in the world in which endemic species are lost, we may be able to help with restoration.

Also, I don’t think people necessarily think about the educational aspect of getting new plants, but there’s a huge potential for learning that goes along with it. It may be that you walk by a specimen and say, “Oh, that’s a really nice plant... They just moved that in,” and not think much more about it. A little bit later, perhaps you say, “I’d like to have that in my yard.” or “It looks nice with that grouping of other plants.” Or your curiosity drives you to look it up on the website. That’s education! It may not be classroom learning, but it’s education nonetheless.

**JM:** Squint your eyes really hard and pretend I’m one of your young students. What sage advice would you have for me about the possibilities of pursuing a career in horticulture or public garden management?

**FH:** When I was graduating from university, one of my professors said to make sure you get a good base of knowledge out in the real world before striving to become a leader. That was really sage advice for me, and I’ve given it to our students.

Universities present you with problem solving, but most of what you learn is on the job—how to work with people, and how to put your problem-solving skills into the job that you’ve taken on. You can have the goal of being a leader, but I think it’s one of the reasons why CEOs are usually people in their 50s and 60s. You need to have that grounded experience first.

So that’s one piece of advice. For people in horticulture, you need to have some business acumen to go along with the science. Everything works off of business and budgets. A lot of folks go into the field to be nursery people, maintenance operators or arborists. Well, what are those? They are businesses, and you need to develop that business acumen in order to do well.

And another one, because it applies to myself: Get comfortable with public speaking. If you can’t express your ideas in the spoken word, they will remain with you.

**JM:** Are there any initiatives or projects or goals that you wish you had more time to complete, and that you’re hoping to pass the baton on?

**FH:** Yes. There are a lot! Because the work we do is a continuum.

The 520 project: It would be nice to see the end of this one. I could stay for five more years, and that would not happen.

The education building: I really would have liked to have seen something come out of that process. I think it’s really important that we continue our educational focus and steward more students. I know you guys will figure out a way to accommodate that.

The arborist and horticultural programs: The Foundation has helped us a lot, but we are so underfunded in this area. Plant curation also receives very little funding. What is an Arboretum without the horticulture staff and the curation? I would like to have developed this even further. We’re on the right track but have a ways to go.

Pacific Connections: Of course, I’d like to see the ecogeographic forests completed. Gardens are dynamic, so there’s no real finish line, but seeing them implemented on a base level would have been really fun for me.

**JM:** I’ll close with this question. You recently became a grandfather for the second time. Is Otis his name?

**FH:** Yes.

**JM:** What hope do you have for the kind of Arboretum that all of our grandchildren will inherit?

**FH:** I would like all the young people to understand that the Arboretum is a place of nature and natural, living organisms. But there’s
also a story, and the way that we develop it. I want that story to be told, and I hope they can understand it in the future.

**JM:** Thanks Fred. I’ve said it before—in a few different arenas—but your DNA is all over this place, and it’s going to be so for generations. I’ve always been inspired by your passion and dedication. It’s great to see someone who gets to the end of a very long career and is still 100 percent in it!

**FH:** Thank you! I have loved working here. The Arboretum is a very special place, and it’s not just because of the plants and the landscape. A lot of things have happened here that are really unique. I just hope future generations respect it even more than we do today and treat it in the manner that it should be treated.

**Jason Morse** is the owner and principal of Morse Landscape Architecture (www.morse-landscape.com) and a member of the Arboretum Foundation Board of Directors.

---

**Fred Hoyt Botanic Exploration Fund**

In honor of Fred’s 38 years of service with UW Botanic Gardens, the Arboretum Foundation has established this fund to enable additions of wild-collected, rare or endangered plants to the Arboretum’s collections, with a special focus on Pacific Connections. Funds may cover future collecting expeditions, or partnerships with other gardens, nurseries or collectors.

The letter to Fred announcing the fund included this quote from UW Associate Professor Emeritus Iain Robertson, from a recent Historylink interview: “Fred has been one of the most important people in the Arboretum, probably more than anyone else has. He’s been constant over many, many years. And he’s been great at talking with people from different perspectives and making sure that every viewpoint is heard.”

To learn more or contribute to the fund, visit www.arboretumfoundation.org/our-work/revitalizing-the-arboretum.