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Morton Arboretum redevelopment unites all staff members in one facility



The new Curatorial and Operations Center is used by arborists, horticulturists and others who care for the Morton Arboretum's 1,700 acres.

Daniel White | Staff Photographer



By Robert Sanchez

It takes a lot of people to maintain the Morton Arboretum's pristine 1,700 acres.

Now, for the first time, those staff members are working under the same roof at the tree museum in Lisle.

Two massive buildings have been erected on the South Farm, which is the base of operations for up to 130 arborists, horticulturists and others who care for the arboretum's tree collections and landscapes. One of the new structures is the

37,000-square-foot Curatorial and Operations Center. The other is a 39,000-square-foot vehicle storage facility.

"South Farm is the heart of the arboretum — essential in supporting the mission of an institution dedicated to the care, conservation and study of trees as they face increasing challenges," said Gerard T. Donnelly, arboretum president and CEO. "With state-of-the-art features and space for a growing staff with ever-advancing initiatives, the new South Farm complex will better serve the needs of the arboretum now and in the future."

Arborists, horticulturists and plant collections staffers used to be "scattered" in different locations, according to Susan Jacobson, the arboretum's manager of planning and site design. That changed recently when they moved into the new Curatorial and Operations Center.

"This gives them an opportunity to work side by side, communicate a little better and coordinate our efforts to keep the grounds looking nice," Jacobson said.

The \$20.2 million project included the construction of new greenhouses and plant production facilities in an area west of Route 53. It's the largest project in the arboretum's \$63 million Growing Brilliantly capital campaign.

Jacobson said the Curatorial and Operations Center and the vehicle storage facility replaced two old barns that were part of the Morton family farm. The barns had been converted into maintenance facilities.

"It was not the most convenient or efficient way for us to maintain our grounds," Jacobson said. "So we wanted to centralize our collections and facilities staff and improve our ability to expand the maintenance we're doing."

Work on the project started in February 2016.

The vehicle storage facility was completed first. The Curatorial and Operations Center was finished by August.

On the outside, both LEED-certified buildings look similar to existing structures on the site.

"We did that on purpose because we wanted to match the general flavor of this area," Jacobson said.

Meanwhile, the new buildings provide space and resources to better meet the needs of the arboretum, officials said.

The Curatorial and Operations Center includes office space, conference rooms, and a large lunchroom that doubles as a meeting space. The main conference room contains a reminder of the Emerald Ash Borer beetle invasion -- a table made from an ash tree killed by the insects.

Other highlights of the building includes a carpenter's shop, a sign shop, a mechanical shop and storage areas. There's also a small engine repair room, a vehicle repair area and a vehicle wash bay.

Large windows throughout the building to allow plenty of natural light to pour in. In the parking lot, stormwater is routed to channeled trenches that provide water for trees and other plants.

After years of planning and 18 months of construction, Jacobson said she's very pleased with the redevelopment of South Farm.

"It's so nice," she said. "It's a great space to work in."

The arboretum's Growing Brilliantly capital campaign is ongoing and expected to be wrapped up next year.