Through common assumptions an assortment of plants can seem fairly natural, yet when this collection is compacted into a single space, the plants are indigenous to different parts of the world, and when hours of human intervention are necessary to care for the plants, the natural effect is lost. While I expected to be awed by how natural the Smith Botanical Gardens would appear, I found that other aspects of the gardens surprised me. I was impressed by how well organized, labeled, and designed the gardens were. I came to suspect that a botanical garden is a combination of art and science, it is both a lab and canvas.

It was obvious that the Succulent House required a high level of human intervention to put together and maintain. Plants had been gathered from four different continents of the world and arranged in different sections of the room. One side of the room was dedicated to African and European plants while the other side to North and South American plants. While all the specimens were from arid climates, in no way did I feel like I was in a desert. In a desert the plants would be very spread out, but here the plants were in pots placed very close together. As I scanned the plants I began to feel like I was in a science lab. Each plant was marked with its scientific name and where it was from, organized so that any individual plant could be easily located, pulled from the shelf, and carefully examined at any moment. The white brick walls were a constant reminder that the room was man made, that it was not constructed by nature. I was not in the wilderness; I was in a science lab, a prime location to examine individual species of plants.

As I walked outside of the greenhouse I came across similar plants to what I observed in the Succulent House. These plants looked desert like as well, but I did not feel like I was in an arid ecosystem. The cold wind stung my face and the light spray of the sprinklers in the distance...
made it difficult to fathom that I was looking at plants indigenous to arid regions. Just like indoors, each plant was labeled with its scientific name and natural habitat. While most of the plants were from the South American deserts, there were some from other continents. I pondered how arid plants could survive in a New England climate, and if the crew of landscapers working at the opposite end of the gardens had to pay extra attention to these plants. I knew these plants were far from the ecosystems they belonged in, so seeing cacti living outdoors in New England weather, surviving through hurricanes and blizzards, did not seem possible without the assistance of human beings. I was developing the impression I could pick up one of these plants and place it outside my home in Connecticut, yet I knew it could never survive in that climate. Once again I felt like I was surrounded more so by an organized and carefully taken care of science lab rather than a natural environment where plants grow on their own without human intervention.

The section dedicated to the arid species outdoors was one of the most visually appealing sections of the garden. The plants sat in a concrete structure that formed three sides of a box, and the fourth side was the brick wall of the green house. This box was like an artist’s canvas. Sunken about eight inches below the lip of the concrete was a bed of gravel and the plants laid out on top of the stone in the most aesthetically pleasing fashion. The main focal point was a group of plants that stood up against the brick wall. In the center of this cluster was a ball-like plant, with its long spine like leaves growing out from the bottom in a spherical structure, clearly dominating this box of arid plants. To the left of this round plant, sat a cactus that had oval-shaped leaves, and to the right was another cactus, yet its appearance resembled vines rather than leaves. It felt as if I was staring at piece of artwork, my attention stolen by a sharp contrast I spot in the center, just like the long sharp spines of the plant that differ from the rounded edges of the plants both to its right and left. In Horace Walpole’s “The History of the Modern Taste in
Gardening” he describes the transformation of nature into a garden. He writes, “Thus dealing in none but the colours of nature, and catching its most favourable features, men saw a new creation opening before their eyes. The living landscape was chastened or polished, not transformed.”

Examining this section of the garden I was reminded of what Walpole wrote, how man took the “most favourable features” of nature, and opposed to transforming the landscape he “polished” and “chastened” it into a magnificent garden. Just as an artist looks out onto a landscape and then chooses what to paint on his canvas, some human had to come in and view this space as a blank canvas before shaping it into a garden.

Back inside the Succulent House was not as aesthetically pleasing as the section of arid plants outside, but there was an area in the center of the room that looked like an artist put it together. The center of this structure stood a little bit higher off the ground than the rest of it, and starting about two feet from the center there stood a few tall and slender rocks that stood erect next to next to smaller arid plants. I sensed that the center was raised slightly off the ground to give attention to these smaller plants because moving away from the center there were much larger cacti. Further, towards the outside the cacti were exciting shades of emerald and lime rather than the duller shades of green that many of the plants in the center possessed. On the edges of the centerpiece existed the plants with largest leaves and even some trees that stood as high as the ceiling. In Keith Thomas’s “Cultivation or Wilderness” he discusses how agricultural development was a way to impose human order on the otherwise disorderly natural world, and as I studied this centerpiece, I witnessed what Thomas wrote about. There were plants of all different colors, textures, sizes, and shapes, yet as a whole the collection was

aesthetically satisfying because humans had worked for numerous years to perfect this room.

This centerpiece was like an artist’s canvas, and like an artist who paints a masterpiece; someone had to put in great amounts of time and effort to organize these plants and rocks into a visually satisfying exhibit.

A garden is a mixture of science and art. While the specimens in a garden can be studied and used for experiments, they can also be organized in the most aesthetically pleasing manners. While initially I thought I would have a similar experience visiting the gardens as if I were visiting the wilderness, after spending some time in the gardens I realized that this assumption was incorrect. A garden is the product of human organization, creativity, and intervention, and as a result it is both a lab and a canvas.

I looked to change up the intro making the changes to the intro you guys said was necessary. Otherwise I did not change anything because after I met with Professor Lopez I knew exactly what to look for and wanted to change.