



THE GARDENS OF ALCATRAZ



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For more than a century, gardens were an important part of everyday life for officers, families, and prisoners confined to Alcatraz by sentence or duty. Many of the plants selected by these unheralded gardeners proved to be excellent choices for the harsh and barren environment, flourishing through the four decades of neglect that followed the prison's closing. Today, visitors to Alcatraz encounter an island alive with colorful plants gathered decades ago from around the world.

These “escaped” gardens have the potential to illustrate, in a dramatic way, the importance of gardens to the human spirit and the ecological benefits and aesthetic possibilities of sustainable gardening. With that aim, the Garden Conservancy and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy have formed a partnership with the National Park Service to restore and maintain the key gardens of this National Historic Landmark.



Rosa 'Russelliana'
Europe

Pre-American Contact

Alcatraz is a "bare little camel's back of land...rising in a double summit some 140 feet above the tide." The island has only a thin deposit of soil that supports sparse native grasses and shrubs.

1865 By the end of the Civil War, residents have begun excavating pockets in the

rock and filling them with imported soil. Alongside the engineer's office building, they plant a garden and enclose it within a white picket fence.

1870 A formal Victorian garden graces the front of



the brick citadel, and another appears just below the island's crest. Cannon balls stacked into long pyramidal rows form one side of the garden in which officers and their families find respite among the flowerbeds.

1880 Lighthouse keepers plant and maintain a garden.

1890 The adaptable agave, also known as the century plant, first appears in a photo of officers' row.



1912 A massive concrete cellhouse replaces the citadel, eliminating the Victorian garden.



1924 The California Spring Blossom and Wildflower Association initiates an islandwide beautification project. Prisoners plant 300 donated trees and shrubs, and receive training in gardening and pruning.

1934 After closing as a military prison, Alcatraz reopens as a federal penitentiary. Fred Reichel, secretary to Warden Johnston, assumes responsibility for the rose garden, greenhouse, and other gardens.

He corresponds with noted California horticulturists, seeking advice and receiving plants.

1941 Inmate Elliott Michener begins a nine-year career as an inmate gardener. Michener builds a toolshed and greenhouse on the west side, now in ruins. He receives

permission to order seeds and bulbs, and credits this experience with providing him a "lasting interest in creativity."



1963 US Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy orders Alcatraz closed; the island and its gardens begin an extended period of neglect.

MISSION

The mission of the Alcatraz Historic Gardens Project is to preserve and maintain the gardens created by those who lived on the island during its military and prison eras, and to interpret their history, horticulture, and cultural significance for visitors.

WHY RESTORE THE GARDENS?

More than one million visitors come to Alcatraz annually, drawn by its infamous history. Although the roses, agaves, fuchsias, and other colorful specimens that run rampant over the island are part of that history, they are largely unnoticed by visitors and undefined by the park's interpretive program. There are stories to be told about how plants came to the island, who planted and cared for them, and how they survived. By restoring and interpreting the gardens of Alcatraz, a large and diverse audience will learn more about daily life during the military and federal prison eras and be inspired by the rewards of horticulture.

This project also presents opportunities to involve people in the restoration of a significant American garden and to attract and train gardeners from a variety of backgrounds. For example, a crew from the California Department of Corrections works in the garden one day a week, and members of the Alcatraz Alumni Association (former inmates and correctional officers, and their families) are sharing their gardening stories and memories.

THE PROJECT PARTNERSHIP

Restoration of the gardens requires a collaborative effort. The National Park Service must devote its limited resources to keeping the island's buildings intact, but the Garden Conservancy and Parks Conservancy are uniquely suited to providing leadership for the garden preservation effort.

Following planning sessions with Park Service managers and California garden preservation advocates, the Garden Conservancy and Parks Conservancy began stabilizing the gardens in 2003. They hired a project manager and horticulturist, who work with volunteer gardeners every week, weeding and pruning. This work is gradually revealing the structure of the old gardens.

A project team is now developing a long-term plan for the gardens. Initially, the team prepared a comprehensive cultural landscape inventory that documented the history and condition of the island's gardens. This serves as the basis for the treatment plans, which describe the preservation, restoration, or rehabilitation work to be done in each garden area.

1972 Alcatraz becomes part of the newly created Golden Gate National Recreation Area; by the following year, the National Park Service develops interpretive programs and the public is welcomed to Alcatraz for the first time in its history.

1992 The National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy

sponsor an inventory of the island's plants. They propagate plants in a nursery for eventual return to the gardens.

1996 The Parks Conservancy publishes *The Gardens of Alcatraz*, which celebrates the history of more than one hundred years of gardening on The Rock.



2003 The Alcatraz Historic Gardens Project begins, sponsored by the National Park Service, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the Garden Conservancy. Volunteer gardeners begin to remove invasive vegetation and care for garden plants.

HOW WILL THE GARDENS BE RESTORED?

Four key areas offer the greatest potential for preservation and interpretation: the main entry road, officers' row, the warden's house and the cellhouse slopes, and the west side gardens.

When replanting the gardens, the project team will use historical photographs to determine design intent, plant form, and garden character. It will use historic plants still on the island, and also reintroduce plants with appropriate cultural requirements. In some cases, substitute plants of a similar type, form, and scale will be used if historic plants are no longer available or not sustainable under current conditions.

Completing the project and sustaining the gardens over time will require professional horticulturists; skilled craftspeople to repair and rebuild garden structures; trained garden volunteers; tools, soil, plants, and irrigation for building and maintaining the garden; and interpretive materials such as brochures, exhibits, and other publications that tell the story to the widest possible audience. In the future, visitors will be able to see the gardens as they once existed and appreciate the beauty of their incomparable setting.





The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy is the non-profit support partner for the Golden Gate National Parks. A membership organization, the Conservancy was created to preserve the Golden Gate National Parks, enhance the experiences of park visitors, and build a community dedicated to conserving the parks for the future. To become a member, phone (415) 4R-PARKS or visit www.parksconservancy.org.



The National Park Service was created in 1916 to preserve America's natural, cultural, and scenic treasures, which today number 388, and to provide for their enjoyment for future generations. For information about the Golden Gate National Parks, phone (415) 561-4700 or visit www.nps.gov/goga.



The Garden Conservancy is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving exceptional American gardens. For more information or to become a member, phone the San Francisco office, (415) 561-7895, or national headquarters, (845) 265-2029, or visit www.gardenconservancy.org.

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To volunteer, please visit www.parksconservancy.org.

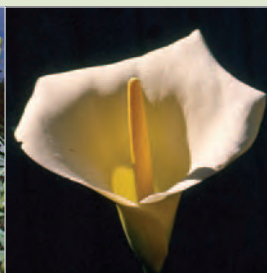
Photo Credits: Cover: island ©Maggie Hallahan; inmate gardener by Joseph H. Simpson. Timeline, left to right: GGNRA Archives; Eadweard Muybridge, Bancroft Library; San Francisco Public Library; Alcatraz Alumni Association; Joseph H. Simpson; same; Roy Eisenhardt. Photo page: center left, Joseph H. Simpson; center right, Fred Straley; bottom right, Carola Ashford. All others by Roy Eisenhardt. Map by Haisam Hussein.



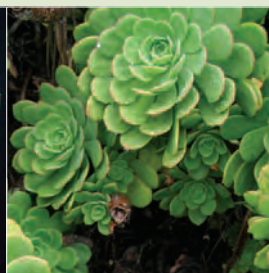
Acanthus mollis
Mediterranean Basin



Globe artichoke
Mediterranean Basin



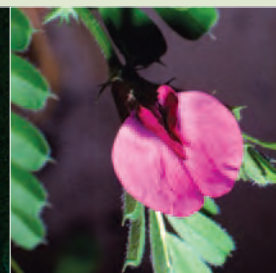
Zantedeschia aethiopica
South Africa



Aeonium
North Africa



Rosa 'Gardenia'
Europe



Lathyrus latifolius
Europe