

THE HUNTINGTON Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens



Desert Garden Fact Sheet

Overview

The Huntington Desert Garden is one of the largest and oldest assemblages of cacti and other succulents in the world, as well as a stunning example of a water-conserving garden. More than 5,000 species from sixty families of succulents and other arid-adapted plants comprise this, the Huntington's most important conservation collection. The Desert Garden agave, aloe, and yucca collections, along with the cacti, are among the Huntington's most significant research collections. The incredible diversity of the plantings and presence of rare mature specimens makes this 11-acre garden extraordinary.

History

The "Cactus Garden" was originally proposed by William Hertrich, Garden Superintendent, as a way to deal with an eroded, south-facing slope. His original 1907 planting of 300 cacti on half an acre was soon expanded with plants from local nurseries, private residences, public parks, and from collection trips to the American Southwest and Mexican deserts. By 1912 the garden covered 5 acres. When the reservoir at the bottom of the garden was drained in 1925, the garden expanded to 10 acres. The red scoria rock was brought in 1929 to form well-draining raised bed rockeries. Under the direction of Myron Kimnach, curator of the Botanical Gardens and succulent expert, the collections grew and the name was changed to the Desert Garden. In 2004, a 1.5 acre section of the garden, the Heritage Walk, was opened to the public for the first time.

Landscape

The Desert Garden has changed significantly since it was first established. Originally planted in rigid geometric shapes, over the years parts of it have been reformed to present a more natural appearance and many beds have been replanted to create groupings that correspond to floristic regions. The design objective is the aesthetically pleasing display of succulent plants that highlights and contrasts their diverse forms and colors.

Collections

- BOTTLE PALMS (*Beaucarnea* in the Agavaceae), are some of the oldest specimens in cultivation and among the earliest plantings in the Desert Garden. Many species of agave terminate their life cycle by generating a branched inflorescence up to 30 feet tall.
- ALOES constitute of the largest collections outside Africa. *Aloe arborescens* on the hill above the newly-opened historic section has an unrivalled winter display of fiery red flowers.
- PUYAS are terrestrial bromeliads that put on a spectacular floral display in April and early May. Other rarely seen species are located in the historic section.

- Most desert columnar plants belong to the South American genus *Cereus*. They form the structure of much of the Desert Garden landscape, producing flowers in the late summer and colorful fruit in fall.
- The cereus-like plants in the African section of the upper garden are succulent spurges of the *Euphorbia* genus. They have milky latex which can be caustic. Most of the species in the garden are native to South Africa and eastern Africa. CROWN OF THORNS (*Euphorbia milii*) is a leafy, thorny native of Madagascar but produces colorful bracts throughout the year.
- The most spectacular cactus displays are the 700 bright-yellow-spined, spring-flowering GOLDEN BARREL CACTI (*Echinocactus grusonii*), the largest being more than 85 years old.
- The Crassula Family consists of unarmed leaf succulents found mostly in Mexico and Africa. Cool autumn brings out pastel leaf colors in *Aeonium*, *Echeveria*, *Kalanchoe*, *Pachyphytum*, and *Sedum*. Most bedding plants are Crassulaceae.
- The near legendary BOOJUM TREE (*Fouquieria columnaris*) in the Baja Bed is native to Baja California. It is an oddity due to its fleshy stem. The better know ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) is in the California bed. The central garden is landscaped with numerous species from Mexico with bright red blossoms most of the year.

Desert Garden Conservatory

At the upper end of the desert garden, a greenhouse is home to some 3,000 vulnerable succulents that might not survive if they were to get too much water or were exposed to freezing temperatures. And some are just too small and fragile to compete with the more vigorous plants in the outdoor garden. The conservatory is open every weekend and augmented by interpretive signs and Ask Me docents.

Programs

- The Desert Garden Botanical ARK Project is conducted by staff and volunteers to ensure the propagation, conservation, and the distribution of holdings that are rare, endangered, and of significant horticultural, scientific, and economic value.
- Each Labor Day weekend, the Succulent Symposium features speakers lecturing on conservation, biology, taxonomy, and collection management.
- Ask Me docents host the Desert Conservatory and give 30-minute tours limited to the Desert Garden.
- The Reading Plants school program for grades 3 to 6 highlights the adaptations of Desert Garden plants to arid regions.
- There is a special volunteer program for the collection of detailed flower and fruiting data for scientific and horticultural purposes.
- As staffing permits, a Plant Discovery Cart designed to facilitate exploration of the Desert Garden is stationed near the bottom of the garden. It has activities for families with an emphasis on the young children who love this area.