Recovery on the Rock

Project is restoring Gardens of Alcatraz

By Joan Morris

EVEN IF YOU'VE never made the trip to Alcatraz, it doesn't take much imagination to picture it — a concrete prison fortress perched on an island of sandstone and long rows of cells where some of the nation's Most Wanted spent out their days in total and isolation. But that's not the only view of Alcatraz.

Lush foliage thrives on every inch of the Rock that nature and gardeners can claim, filling the landscape with color, aroma and a link to the island's history. And while the Gardens of Alcatraz project is turning the island green, it may also be inspiring the National Park Service to go even greener, bringing sustainability to the island.

The venture, begun in 2003, is the combined work of the Garden Conservancy, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service. It's goal, says project director Shalagh Friel, is to restore the gardens by reaching back in time.

To fully appreciate what's been accomplished here, a short history lesson is in order. Alcatraz was first settled by the U.S. military in the 1830s. The fort built there was part of a three-pegged line of defense of the Golden Gate. Matched with Fort Point and Fort Baker, the trio provided a formidable deterrent against aggressors. A barren sandstone rock, Alcatraz was blasted, carved and sculpted into an imposing citadel jutting above the cold water of the Bay. To help with its transformation, tons of earth were moved from nearby Angel Island to shape Alcatraz into something resembling a defendable space.

The colonization was complete when the waves and

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SLIDE SHOW

Flowers found on the island include Solarium marginatum or white-marginated rightshisha, Columbine and fuchsia Angel Earrings.
families of Alcatraz’s military officers moved onto the island. To make it feel more like a home, they planted gardens.

When the fort’s mission changed in 1861 to that of a military prison, a different set of families arrived, and they planted more gardens. In 1894, the prison changed from military to federal, but the gardening continued with the families of wardens and guards. This time, a select few inmates got in on the act, too.

When Alcatraz was finally abandoned in 1963, nature took over. In the intervening decades of neglect, the gardens and open spaces were overgrown by ivy, originally planted for erosion control, and thickets of blackberries, blue elderberry and coyote bush, unintentionally imported with the Angel Island soil.

In 2006, after two years of research to locate the original foundations of the various gardens, work began in earnest to restore them. The overgrowth was cleared away and the ghosts of Alcatraz—neatly laid out beds and paths, heirloom rose bushes and bulbs—emerged.

When the rose garden was cleared of the tangle of vines, workers found iris and Homeria (Cape tulip) pushing up through the soil. The bulbs had lain dormant for 40 years, awaiting the touch of the sun and water to reach them beneath the thicket.

Workers also found several original rose bushes, some planted during the military’s occupation, and some planted during the federal prison days. One rose, now called the Alcatraz rose, was of Welsh origins. Gardeners tracing the history discovered that the rose had become extinct in Wales. A few cuttings have been sent back to Wales, where the rose is now being reintroduced.

The ever-evolving gardens are a tribute to the dedication of gardeners who have long since left the island, and those who take the ferry across the Bay to work.

Suzanne Riess of Berkeley was one of the original volunteers who cut their way through overgrowth sometimes 10 feet high. She now helps recruit and coordinate volunteers for the gardens. Looking back, she sees the transformation as nothing short of amazing.

“It is an extraordinary demonstration of the ability of I don’t know how many very keen volunteers,” Riess says, “inspired by exceptional leaders.”

In the process, Riess says, the work and workers have inspired the National Park Service to follow suit. The gardens are very close to being self-sustaining. Work recently was completed on a water catchment system that captures runoff from the massive cell block roof and stores it for use in the garden. And Alcatraz itself is on track to become green with other improvements, including solar.

“The site has been transformed in so many ways,” Riess says. “And I can only think that the gardens pushed that transformation.”

While the hardships of Alcatraz’s prisoners have been well documented, the plants scarcely had an easier time of it. The conditions on the island can be harsh, from the unrelenting sun to the chilling fog and cutting winds.

The plants had to be of a hardy variety, Fritz says, to have survived. The gardeners of the past learned, mostly from trial and error, what would and wouldn’t grow, eventually settling on mostly Mediterranean plants that thrive on little summer water.

Great care has been taken, Fritz says, to find heirloom plants from the era being recreated. Bay Area public gardens have made contributions, including Ruth Bancroft, who started the Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek, and who has supplied a number of heirloom iris from her private collection, Fritz says.

The Gardens recently dedicated a new greenhouse, where they are propagating those original plants to ensure the line that extends almost 150 years into the past will keep going into the future.

The Gardens of Alcatraz cover about four of the island’s 22.5 acres. They are nestled in the foundations of the cell block roof and stores it for use in the garden. And Alcatraz itself is on track to become green with other improvements, including solar.

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TAKE A TOUR
A ticket to Alcatraz includes the garden tour at no extra cost. Self-guided tours will give you a general view of most of the garden areas, but a docent-led tour will take you through all of the gardens.

Docent tours are 9:30 a.m. every Friday and Sunday, starting at the Alcatraz dock (take the 9:10 a.m. ferry from Pier 33 in San Francisco). A docent also is stationed at Officers’ Row from 11 a.m. -2 p.m. every Wednesday for a garden talk and to answer questions.

If you are interested in scheduling a garden tour for a group, send an e-mail to info@alcatrazgardens.org.

To purchase tickets, go to www.alcatrazcruises.com or call 415-981-7625. At this time of year, tickets sell out quickly, so advance reservations are recommended.

Alcatraz is open year-round except for Christmas and New Year.

VOLUNTEERS
Interested in volunteering to work in the gardens or becoming a docent? Contact Shelagh Fritz, project director, at 415-561-4909 or sfritz@gardens保守ancy.org. Or go to the Alcatraz Historic Gardens Project, www.alcatrazgardens.org.

ALCATRAZ SECRETS
MAIN ROAD LANDSCAPE:
Plants line the entry onto the island. The road originally overlooked the small gardens in front of the officers’ homes. You’ll find an Australian tea tree, fuchsia, Jupiter’s Beard, calla, California poppies, pelargoniums and aeonium.

ROSE TERRACE: Several survivor roses, iris and Cape tulips are planted here, which has become the central location of the gardens’ operation. A new greenhouse stands where an original one was located. It took more than two years to locate the beds under a mountain of overgrowth.

OFFICERS’ ROW: Several Victorian homes, torn down when the fort became a military prison and someone decided that the civilians were too close to the prisoners, contain the terraced gardens planted between the homes as well as flower beds planted in the basement foundations of the demolished homes.

WARDEN’S HOUSE: The garden, established by the warden’s wife, now showcases examples of plants that are growing on the island.

CELLHOUSE SLOPE: A blanket of purple covers the treacherous slope beneath the Alcatraz lighthouse. Persian carpet ice plant was established by the Army to help with erosion control. It blooms throughout the year.

WEST LAWN AND TOOL-SHED TERRACES: This area was once a huge expanse of lawn that provided breathtaking views of San Francisco. During its prison days, the lawn was a deliberate attempt to prevent escape as it provided no tall vegetation for would-be escapees to hide in and make their way down to the water. Much of the lawn has been overgrown and now provides habitat for nesting water birds, mostly egrets and seagulls.

WEST SIDE PRISONER GARDENS: Inmates once walked through this area on their way to work in the prison industries building. In the 1940s, inmate Elliot Michener received permission to transform salvaged items into garden terraces, a greenhouse and bird bath. Using kitchen scraps to amend the soil and seeds the staff brought him, he and other prison gardeners created a lush landscape, often the only bit of beauty the prisoners experienced.
Gardens of Alcatraz project director Shelagh Fritz waters some thirsty plants in the greenhouse.

The Rose Terrace near the greenhouse at the Gardens of Alcatraz.