

Recovery on the Rock



THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ARCHIVES/COURTESY

The lush gardens along the West Road of Alcatraz as they existed in 1946.

Project is restoring Gardens of Alcatraz



SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/
STAFF

Gardens near the Warden's House, above, showcase examples of plants that are growing on the island. Even with the protective wiring, this seagull is caught in the act of plucking plants in the Roadside Garden.



By Joan Morris

jmorris@bayareanewsgroup.com

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 spun out their days in tedium 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. Its goal, says project director Shelagh Fritz, 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.

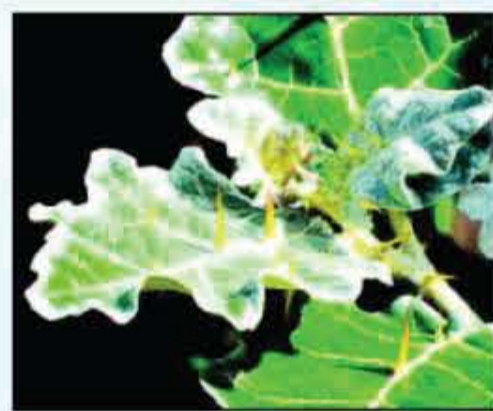
Alcatraz was first settled by the U.S. military in the 1800s. The fort built there was part of a three-pronged line of defense of the Golden Gate. Matched with Fort Point and Fort Baker, the trio provided a formidable deterrent against aggressors. A barren sandstone rock, Alcatraz was blasted, carved 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 habitable space.

The colonization was complete when the wives and

See **ALCATRAZ**, Page 6

SLIDE SHOW

See more pictures from the Gardens of Alcatraz at www.ContraCostaTimes.com/home-garden or www.INSideBayArea.com/home-garden.



SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/STAFF

Flowers found on the island include Solanum marginatum or white-margined nightshade, Columbine and Fuchsia Angel Earrings.



From page 1

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 1934, 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 *Hemerocallis* (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 re-created. Bay Area public gardens have made contributions, including Ruth Bancroft, who started the Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek, and who has supplied a number of heirloom irises 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 torn down Victorians, hidden around bends and spread out around the old cell block. They can be easily overlooked, especially by the an-

nual 1.5 million tourists who visit Alcatraz more intent on seeing where Al Capone was locked up than the drifts of *Drosanthemum* and the sea of aeoniums.

But more docents are being trained to lead botanical tours, and it's well worth the time and legwork to schedule a tour. And after the bleakness of the cell block, the gardens are even more of a wonder.

The spring brings the iris, freesia and fuchsia; the *Drosanthemum*, a ground cover that bursts with pink blooms, starts coming on strong in late spring; summer has roses and pelargoniums; the autumn and winter belong to the succulents — aeoniums, agave and century plants.

Fritz calls each of the gardens "little paradises" that were important to those who have lived on Alcatraz. For many of the prisoners, they were the only bright spots in their days, so meaningful to them that they would break off a flower or leaf of green as they made their way briefly through the prisoners' garden to and from work assignments, sacrificing their water cups to keep the plants alive in the gloom of their cells.

To know what a difference the gardens made in so many lives has provided a strong incentive to keep them thriving.

"When you plant a garden," Fritz says, "you want to believe it will always be there. That's what this project is about."

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@gardenconservancy.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 TOOLSHED 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.



SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/STAFF

