Alcatraz seems an unlikely place to make a garden, for The Rock – as the island is known to San Franciscans across the bay – is as rough and tough as the notorious criminals once incarcerated there. Yet despite the meagre topsoil and scouring salt winds, flowers and lush green growth are slowly softening the battered terraces of this derelict penitentiary.

It’s all thanks to a project designed to transform Alcatraz, which began in 2004. Since then one full-time gardener and a team of enthusiastic volunteers have been hard at work restoring the island’s overgrown gardens, under the joint auspices of the Garden Conservancy, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service.

It was a daunting task. The gardens had lain derelict since the prison closed in 1963, and were choked with weeds. Gradually, with the help of project manager Carola Ashford, the volunteers tore the brambles and ivy from five areas, and terraces and beds began to emerge. The autumn rain and sunshine began to coax bulbs and plants from the original gardens back to life after years of lying concealed or dormant. Indeed, many plants had actually thrived in the neglect, including echiums, fig, fuchsias, irises, artichokes, agaves, peppermint, mallows, aeoniums, perennial sweet peas and a huge, fragrant Rosa wichurana.

The Rock

The surviving garden plants were a legacy of more than a century of gardening on Alcatraz. When the first families arrived on Alcatraz in the 1850s to maintain the newly built lighthouse, there was so little topsoil that they had to ship some in to begin the first gardens.
The island had little natural vegetation before their arrival, and no fresh water. Nevertheless the gardens were said to be a success, and the military families who settled on Alcatraz from the late 1850s made more of them. Wives of the island’s military officers established a ‘tea society’ and would take afternoon refreshment on the flower-filled, formal terraces they tended overlooking the bay.

From 1934 federal wardens’ families took over, using fruit, vegetables and flowers from the gardens in their homes. The warden’s secretary until 1941, Fred Reichel, took charge of the gardens, experimenting with species from Mediterranean-type climates, which he thought would thrive in the low rainfall; many of his introductions survive today.

Convict gardeners

Prison inmates also tended the gardens, although there’s no record of the most notorious – such as Al Capone or ‘Machine Gun’ Kelly – taking part. Counterfeiter Elliot Michener created terraced gardens on the west side of the island, complete with a greenhouse and birdbath. He later wrote of the therapeutic qualities of gardening. ‘The hillside provided refuge from the disturbances of the prison, the work a release, and it became an obsession, the one thing I could do well.’

For Shelagh Fritz, the head gardener since 2006 and project manager since November last year, this is a truly extraordinary garden. Apart from its history, the spectacular view of San Francisco and the thriving colony of sea birds, how many other gardening jobs give you the chance to spot whales basking offshore while digging the flowerbeds? Besides, the work that remains offers quite a challenge, as Shelagh points out. “Many of the old gardens haven’t been touched yet,” she says. “And besides, a garden is never really done.”

**Timeline**

From 1775 to 2003

1775 Spanish mariner Juan Manuel de Ayala, the first European to enter San Francisco Bay, coins the name ‘La Isla de los Alcatraces’ or ‘isle of strange birds’.

1854 A lighthouse is built on Alcatraz, and its keepers import topsoil from which to make gardens.

1858 A fortress is completed on the island.

1868 Alcatraz becomes a military prison.

1881 Terraced gardens are created around the officers’ houses.

1924 After pressure from the city of San Francisco, the military beautifies the island, planting trees and sowing wildflowers.


1963 President John F Kennedy closes the prison on grounds of cost. The buildings are abandoned and the gardens become overgrown.

1969-71 Native American protestors occupy the island, demanding the return of land taken from their ancestors.

1973 Most of the island opens to visitors.

1986 Alcatraz is declared a National Historic Landmark.

2003 The Garden Conservancy launches garden restoration project with work starting the following year.

USEFUL INFORMATION

HISTORY For stories about Alcatraz’s past, see two National Park Service websites, www.nps.gov/history/ and www.nps.gov/alicatraz/

FURTHER READING For more details of the Alcatraz gardens project see www.alcatrazgardens.org

HOW TO GET THERE For details of ferries to Alcatraz call +1 415 981 7625, www.alcatrazcruises.com

TOURS OF THE GARDENS Fridays and Sundays, 9.30am.

For information about escape attempts from Alcatraz, and its most notorious residents, see www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A530641

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**The South African succulent Drosanthemum floribundum flowers in such huge drifts that it can be seen from the mainland.**

**Pretty white yarrow (Achillea mollis) and purple Verbena bonariensis grow happily despite the strong winds.**

**Wall flowers surround a small walnut tree in the greenhouse garden, which was originally created by an inmate, the counterfeiter Elliot Michener.**

**Some of the graffiti dates from the occupation of the island by Native American protestors (see Timeline), left.**

**Shelagh Fritz (left) helps the late Carola Ashford to replant an iris that survived the neglect after 1963.**

**Wire fences still divide the gardens, now softened by Shirley poppies (Papaver rhoeas ‘Shirley Group’) and Gaura lindheimeri.**

**For Shelagh Fritz (left) the gardens are a refuge from the disturbances of the prison, a release, and an obsession, the one thing she could do well.**

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