



Escape to Alcatraz

Once, America's hardest criminals languished within its walls – but now the terraces around the abandoned penitentiary are surrounded by newly restored gardens brimming with flowers

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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, figs, 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. ▶



Monterey cypress trees shade a bed that includes long-lived, pink-purple *Penstemon 'Midnight'* (mingling with red-pink *Centranthus ruber* to the left of the picture) and purple *Limonium perezii*. TOP LEFT Surrounded by icy seas with treacherous currents, Alcatraz proved virtually impossible to escape from.

In brief

WHAT Former prison island with gardens restored since 2004
WHERE The island of Alcatraz, San Francisco Bay, California
SIZE The island covers 22 acres; the restored gardens four acres
SOIL Thin layer of topsoil over rock
CLIMATE Windy, mild, dry in summer
SPECIAL FEATURES Terrace gardens surround dilapidated buildings; among the ruins, naturalised garden plants, including succulents, grow freely

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▷ 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.” □

USEFUL INFORMATION

HISTORY For stories about Alcatraz’s past, see two National Park Service websites, www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/alca/overview.html and www.nps.gov/alcatraz/
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 inmates, see www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A530641

Timeline

From seabirds to jailbirds and back

1775

Spanish mariner Juan Manuel de Ayala, the first European to enter San Francisco Bay, coins the name ‘La Isla de los Alcatrazes’ or ‘island 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

1934

Alcatraz becomes a federal prison. Prisoners include Al Capone, Robert ‘The Birdman’ Stroud and George ‘Machine Gun’ Kelly

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

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



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



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

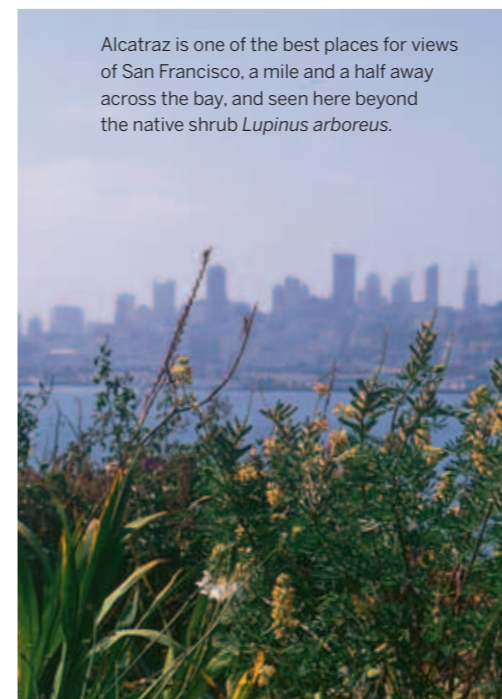


Shelagh Fritz (left) helps the late Carola Ashford to replant an iris that survived the neglect after 1963.

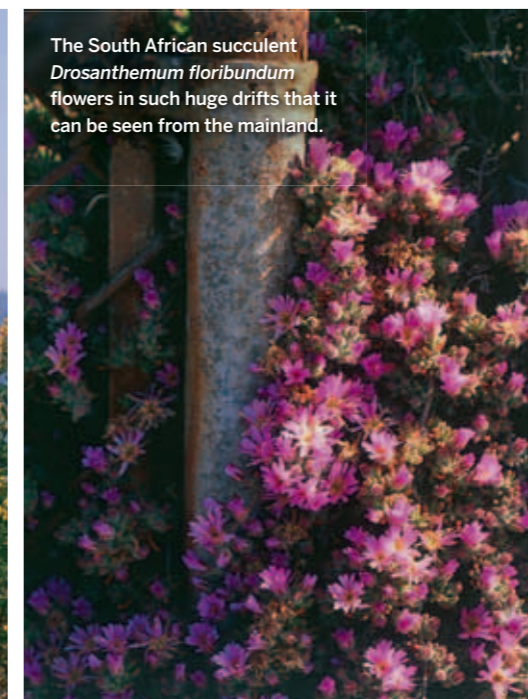


the gardens of alcatraz

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



Alcatraz is one of the best places for views of San Francisco, a mile and a half away across the bay, and seen here beyond the native shrub *Lupinus arboreus*.



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



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