GARDENING ON THE ROCK

Over the years, this former prison has become an unlikely garden spot.

By Judith B. Tankard

When I recently stepped off the ferry at Alcatraz Island, I momentarily imagined I was back on Madeira, an island off the coast of southern Portugal known for its lush flora and steep, rocky terrain. All that was missing were the banana trees and the poolside resort hotels.
The old-fashioned roses that thrive among the ruins of the army buildings, above, provide cuttings for renewing the gardens. In an 1869 photo by Eadweard Muybridge, soldiers and their families enjoy the gardens, right. Heliotropes, roses, and showy ornamental plants were typical of the Victorian era. Some of the elaborate gardens created by the prisoners in the 1950s can be seen from the guardhouse, below.

Located only 1 1/4 miles from Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco, Alcatraz is a 22-acre sandstone mass battered by winds and often shrouded in fog. It is home to numerous bird colonies: “Alcatraz” is a derivation of the Spanish alcatraz, meaning “strange bird.” Originally an important navigational landmark for San Francisco harbor, this rock-bound island later proved ideal as a defense location. In the 1850s, the United States Army began transforming it into a fortress, building fortifications, a lighthouse, and comfortable Gothic-style cottages, replete with tiny gardens, for the soldiers who were quartered there. To humanize the austerity of the environment and stabilize erosion, they planted the rocky slopes with trees and ground covers.

In 1907 Alcatraz became a U.S. military prison. Convicts sentenced to hard labor were responsible for constructing many of the buildings, including the large reinforced-concrete cellhouse that still looms large on the island. It wasn’t until 1934, when...
the site became a federal penitentiary for Depression-era gangsters such as Capone, that Alcatraz earned its fabled reputation, some of it heavily steeped in myths. The infamous Robert Stroud (“Birdman of Alcatraz”), for instance, never actually raised birds during his incarceration on The Rock, although the story made for a memorable movie.

After the prison closed in 1963, Alcatraz was all but abandoned, except for the 1969–1971 occupation by Native Americans, who accidentally started a fire that destroyed a number of the historic buildings. In 1972, Alcatraz was transferred to the National Park Service, and today it welcomes more than a million visitors a year. Despite the dereliction of the buildings, many of the plants found in the gardens from both the army and federal-prison eras continued to multiply, in some cases becoming invasive. A plant inventory in 1992 identified 230 species, but today that number has dwindled to 190 due to rampant overgrowth and neglect.

The gardens on Alcatraz are significant for several reasons. Not only do they contain a number of rare plants, but they also represent more than 100 years of efforts to make something beautiful out of a hostile environment. Perhaps even more important, they reveal man’s universal need to garden and the value of gardens as enrichments for people’s lives, even those in less than ideal situations. The development of the gardens on Alcatraz falls into two distinct phases: those tended by army families during its years

The century plants (Agave americana), left, that are all over Alcatraz are seedlings from army plantings. Above, a watercolor by George Franklin Heck (prisoner #619) has a a wistful view to the mainland and captures the lushess of the gardens in the 1930s and 1940s. Agaves and other succulents grow happily in the lower terraces, below.
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1870s, the army planted Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) and eucalyptus species to beautify the island and to combat erosion, but early efforts at using ground covers such as sod, grass, and clover on the steep slopes were not entirely successful. The addition of ivy, honeysuckle, and pink ice plant, all of which seemed to thrive, went a long way toward vegetating the island.

Victorian-style ornamental gardens were laid out near the officers' quarters. Early photographer Eadweard Muybridge's images of these gardens in 1869 capture the gaiety of a summer garden party amidst heliotropes, roses, and showy ornamentals. Enclosed by picket fences festooned with climbing roses on trellises, these tiny gardens had window boxes filled with annuals and tiny patches of bluegrass lawns that added a touch of domesticity. Also evident are irrigation troughs, reminders that water was a precious commodity. The army later developed a system for using gray water from the prison showers to facilitate irrigation. It was soon discovered that the plants that flourished on Alcatraz were those from the Mediterranean and similar climates—fuchsia, alyssum, agaves, and the statuesque century plant (*Agave americana*)—all of which flourish there today.

As part of a rehabilitation program, inmates did most of the planting and maintenance. In 1924, the California Spring Blossom and Wild Flower Association donated 300 trees and shrubs, including native pines and sequoias, as well as pounds of nasturtium and Shirley poppy seed, all planted...
by the prisoners. When Fred Reichel, first secretary to the federal warden, visited the island just before the facilities were transferred to the Bureau of Prisons in 1934, he commented: “I was very much impressed by the thousands of hours of hard labor which had gone into its beautification.” He noted that the banks were covered with lavender-flowered mesembryanthemum, and the slopes were filled with century plants.

Gardening activities during the island's early years as a federal prison were primarily carried out under the direction of Reichel, who developed a keen personal interest in horticulture as a tool for prisoner rehabilitation and convinced the warden to allow some of the inmates to work as gardeners. Pictures of some of the prisoners working in the gardens in the 1940s reveal a momentary respite from the hardships of prison life.

During the penitentiary years, the preexisting garden spaces established by the army were retained, even though the earlier wooden buildings were replaced by high-security structures of concrete. Although Reichel freely used annuals and perennials in the flower beds, he soon began looking to succulents and other types of plants that could withstand the island's chronic lack of water. In an interview in 1974, long after he had retired from prison service, Reichel commented, “I kept no records of my failures, for I had many—the main thing was to assure some success by trying many things and holding on to those plants which had learned that life is worth holding on to even at its bitterest.”

Among his successful introductions were white-flowering poppy (Carpenteria californica), flannel bush (Fremontodendron californicum), Pride of Madeira (Echiumfastuosum), the New Zealand Christmas tree (Metrosideros excelsa), aeonium, aloe, sedum, mesembryanthemums, and bulbs. Through his wide-ranging horticultural contacts, he received cuttings from San Diego horticulturist Kate Sessions and Los Angeles nurseryman Hugh Evans, whose single Pride of Madeira from the 1940s has naturalized all over the island. The prisoners' gardens were ablaze with poppies, snapdragons, delphinium, chrysanthemum, dahlias, and iris, some of which were used as cut flowers for the officers' homes. And the vegetables
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grown in the gardens and greenhouses were served in the mess hall.

In the 1980s, after decades of lack of maintenance, the gardens began receiving another infusion of native California plants through the work of volunteers. In 1990, Lawrence Halprin, FASLA, rebuilt the path and steps that were originally established by the army along the southern shoreline. Although the path, now called the Agave Trail for its colonies of agaves on the slopes, is closed to the public during bird-nesting season, this wilder, more undeveloped part of the island hosts tidepools among the shoreline debris. Alcatraz continues to be a fragile environment, with its southern and western shores continually subject to severe erosion. Recent projects by volunteers include replanting the long, narrow planter located at the top of the retaining wall of the Officers' Row garden with more than 300 ivy geranium (Pelargonium peltatum) in drifts of pink, purple, and white that replicate those shown in historic photographs of the gardens in the 1940s.

Concern about the fragile state of these unique gardens prompted the Garden Conservancy to forge a partnership with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service to embark on an ambitious program to document and preserve them. The Parks Conservancy hired horticulturist Deborah Lindsay to begin restoration work and assist in the development of an overall strategic plan, while Carola Ashford, the Marco Polo Scufano Garden Conservancy Fellow for 2004–2005, is updating the plant inventory and researching the history of the gardens.

Since the landscape rehabilitation began, increasing numbers of visitors have been coming to The Rock just to see these special gardens. Recent visitors from New Zealand, for example, came especially to see plants from their own country. An excursion to Alcatraz has much to offer in addition to a glimpse of the bleakness of life behind bars. It affords an opportunity to see an unusual garden in a forbidding site and offers insight into the therapeutic value of gardens as an enrichment to all levels of human life, even when the chips are down.


Resources

- For more information about the preservation activities on Alcatraz, visit www.gardenconservancy.org/alcatraz.
- Ferry service to Alcatraz departs from Pier 41 in San Francisco (tickets can be ordered online at www.blsandgoldfleet.com or by calling 415-705-5555). The last ferry departs Alcatraz at 4:30 PM, and there are no overnight accommodations.

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