While not many people can relate to gardening on an island that was once an infamous maximum-security prison, everyone in California has first-hand knowledge of drought and the need to conserve water. The Gardens of Alcatraz are no exception. We primarily rely on winter rainfall and we’re careful to use it wisely.

The restoration of the historic gardens began in 2003, long after the island’s residents left in 1963. Key garden areas were reclaimed from escaped ivy and they now boast flower gardens once again. When planning for the preservation of the gardens, the Garden Conservancy and partners the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy and the National Park Service knew that it did not make sense to replant gardens that required lots of water. A 12,000-gallon rainwater catchment was designed to run solely on gravity to get the water to the gardens through garden hoses.

Choosing plants for the windy west Prisoners’ Gardens proved to be the most challenging. We decided on a palette of drought-tolerant plants that give the look and feel of the 1950s-era garden. The plant list includes Mediterranean plants along with a few California natives that have evolved to grow in these tough conditions. Our best plants are matilija poppy (Romneya coulteri), Cleveland and Mexican bush sages (Salvia clevelandii and S. leucantha), magenta rockrose (Cistus x pulcherulentus ‘Sunset’), Pelargonium ‘Mrs. Langtry’ and island mallow (Lavatera assurgentiflora).

Our garden thrives because we took the time to plan and work with what natural resources we have. That has made gardening on Alcatraz very rewarding. I’m sure even the inmate gardeners were pleased with themselves when their garden bloomed.