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Citadel Garden 1869

*“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 the plants which had learned that life is worth holding on to even at its bitterest.”*

Fred Reichel, Warden’s Secretary, 1934–1941

## THE GARDENS OF ALCATRAZ

For more than a century, the residents of Alcatraz created gardens to lift their spirits and soften the harshness of their environment. Families, staff, and prisoners gradually built a landscape of flowering terraces, rose gardens, greenhouses, and lawns. When the prison closed in 1963, this manicured landscape became overgrown and wild. A rich variety of ornamental plants—over 230 species—remained as evidence of the island’s garden history.

In 2003, the Garden Conservancy, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the National Park Service began a joint effort to preserve and restore the historic gardens. Volunteer crews now work with staff year-round to plant and maintain the gardens.

## GARDEN SURVIVORS

Alcatraz gardeners needed tough plants that could survive with little water or care. In the 1930s, the warden’s secretary, Fred Reichel, asked the California Horticultural Society and pioneering western plant breeders for seedlings that might do well on the island. Many of the species that he imported came from the world’s other Mediterranean climates, and flourished through 40 years of neglect after the prison closed.

Today, visitors to Alcatraz find a landscape alive with fragrant old roses, fig trees, bulbs, and colorful succulents—historic examples of sustainable planting. Where historic plantings were lost, visitors now find new plants with low maintenance and water needs more appropriate to today’s conditions.



**The Garden Conservancy** is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving exceptional American gardens. For more information or to become a member, phone the San Francisco office, (415) 441-4300, or national headquarters, (845) 265-2029, or visit [www.gardenconservancy.org](http://www.gardenconservancy.org).



**The Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy** is the nonprofit membership organization created to preserve the Golden Gate National Parks, enhance the experience of park visitors, and build a community dedicated to conserving the parks for the future. To become a member, phone (415) 4R-PARKS or visit [www.parksconservancy.org](http://www.parksconservancy.org).



**The National Park Service** was created in 1916 to preserve America’s natural, cultural, and scenic treasures and to provide for their enjoyment for future generations. The Golden Gate National Parks protects more than 75,000 acres in Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo counties. For information about the Golden Gate National Parks, phone (415) 561-4700 or visit [www.nps.gov/goga](http://www.nps.gov/goga).



MARIAN BEARD

For more information or to volunteer, visit [www.alcatrazgardens.org](http://www.alcatrazgardens.org).

*The garden restoration project is supported through grants and individual donations; thank you for your support.*

*Cover photo by Roy Eisenhardt. Plant photos by Roy Eisenhardt, Shelagh Fritz, Elke Olsen, and Elizabeth Byers.*

# THE GARDENS OF ALCATRAZ



|   |   |   |  |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|--|---|---|--|
| <i>Lathyrus latifolius</i><br>Europe          | <i>Agapanthus orientalis</i><br>South Africa    | <i>Globe artichoke</i><br>Mediterranean Basin | <i>Pelargonium 'Brilliant'</i><br>South Africa | <i>Echium candicans</i><br>North Africa         | <i>Fuchsia 'Rose of Castile'</i><br>South America | <i>Rosa 'Russelliana'</i><br>Europe            |
|   |   |   |  |   |   |  |
| <i>Acanthus mollis</i><br>Mediterranean Basin | <i>Drasanthemum floribundum</i><br>South Africa | <i>Tropaeolum majus</i><br>South America      | <i>Aeonium</i><br>North Africa                 | <i>Centranthus ruber</i><br>Mediterranean Basin | <i>Bearded Iris</i><br>Europe                     | <i>Zantedeschia aethiopica</i><br>South Africa |
|   |   |   |  |   |   |  |

## 1859 ARMY FORT AND PRISON

## 1934 FEDERAL PRISON

## 1963 PRISON CLOSED

## 1972 NATIONAL PARK

**A Main Road Landscape**

The switchback road to the summit was blasted out of rock in the 1850s during construction of the island's first fortifications. By the late 1800s, the road led past small gardens of the officers' homes to a large Victorian-style garden at the citadel. The army first lined the road with surplus cannonballs, later using flowerbeds and rows of pots to beautify the approach to the prison.

**B Rose Terrace**

*In front of the water tank, look over the wall to the former site of the rose garden and greenhouse.*

When the Bureau of Prisons arrived in 1933, Fred Reichel, the new warden's secretary, was so impressed by the army gardens that he began to maintain them himself. He raised new plants in the old greenhouse and lobbied for, and trained, inmate gardeners. He also cared for the garden's 50 roses, leaving cut flowers on the dock every Sunday for island families.



JOSEPH H. SIMPSON, 1940s



FRED STRALEY, 1961

**C Officers' Row**

*On the road in front of the cellhouse, look over the planter to see the restored Officers' Row gardens.*

In 1881, the army built three large homes here for the commandant and his officers. A visiting lieutenant reported in 1895, "Near the citadel and officers' quarters, in little garden spots artificially made by bringing earth from the mainland, were blooming in profusion poppies, geraniums, heliotropes, fuchsias and calla lilies." When the Bureau of Prisons demolished two of the houses in 1941, their foundations were converted to flower gardens tended by families and inmates. Volunteers began replanting the flower gardens in 2006.

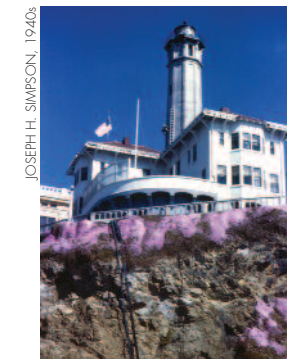
**D Warden's House**

*At the top of the main road are the ruins of the warden's house, which included a small greenhouse built for Warden Swope's wife Edna.*

Inmate Elliott Michener said he gained "a lasting interest in creativity" from eight years of building gardens on the west side. At the end of his sentence he was promoted to the warden's house, and after parole he wrote to the warden, "For the first time I'm learning how much better one can do living honestly than by, say, counterfeiting! We have cars and fat bank accounts...And we have a favor to ask: will you send us a bush of our old 'Gardenia' rose?"



WESLEY SWOPE, 1950s

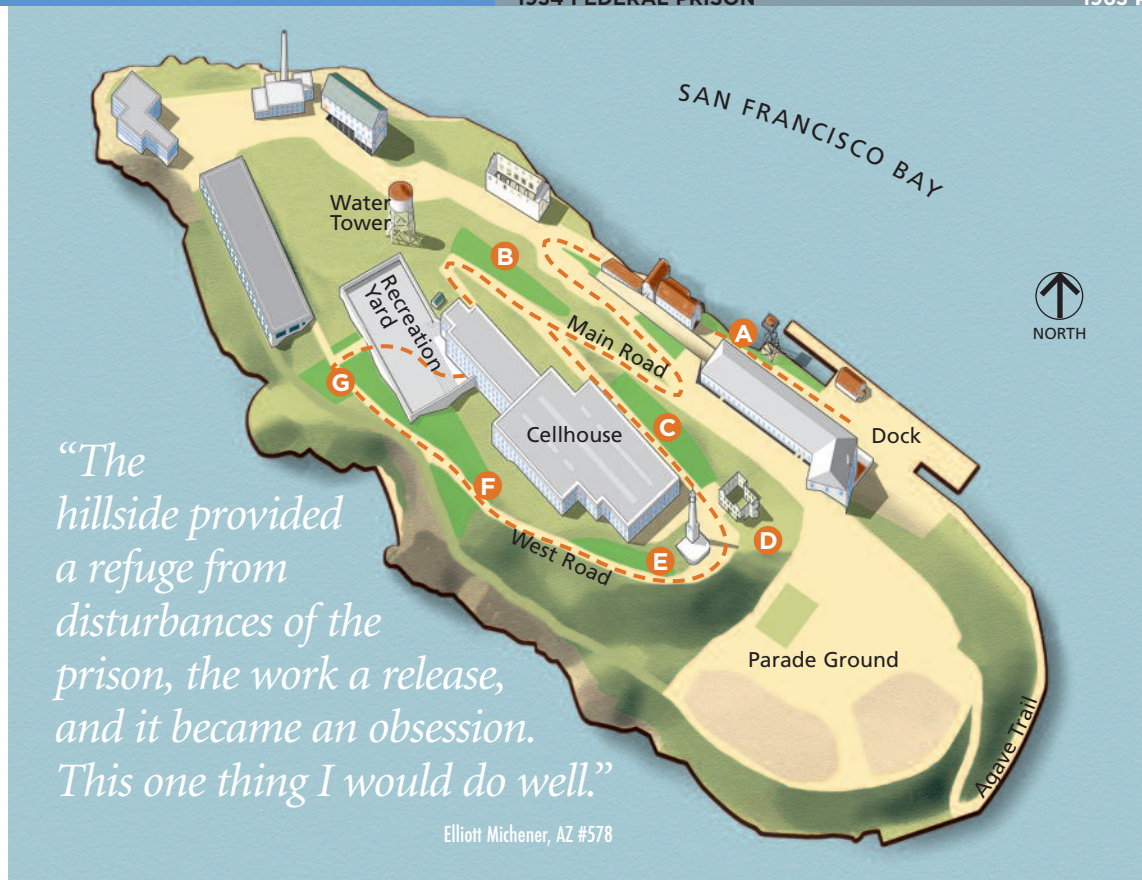


JOSEPH H. SIMPSON, 1940s

**E Cellhouse Slope**

*Below the lighthouse and Eagle Plaza, look for purple iceplant on the slopes along West Road.*

Iceplant, called "Persian carpet" by island residents, once covered many of the island's steep slopes. The army planted the brilliant lavender carpet to control erosion as well as to improve views of "the Rock" from San Francisco.



Elliott Michener, AZ #578

*"The visitor who comes here expects to find a barren rock, but as he strolls over it he is surprised to find roses in bloom, sweet peas, lilies, and a large variety of other flowers in all their beauty and fragrance...In this way barren wastes are converted into garden spots, and ugliness is transformed into beauty."*

Letter published in *The Rock*, Alcatraz newsletter, 1918

**F West Lawn and Toolshed Terraces**

*The flat area below the west face of the cellhouse was once the west lawn. Rock walls terrace the slopes on either side.*

West Road once ran down through a large lawn looking out to the city. This area was irrigated by water reclaimed from the cellhouse showers, a system devised by the army. On the bay side, the lawn has been overgrown by a thicket of fig and other garden plants that now protect nesting waterbirds. The terraces on this side of the island were largely built by inmate gardeners in the 1940s.



WILLIAM LONG, JR., ca. 1960

**G West Side Prisoner Gardens**

*At the end of West Road, below the recreation yard, are the only gardens that most prisoners could see.*

Inmates walked down this fenced and heavily guarded hillside every day on their way to work in the prison industries buildings. In the 1940s, inmate Elliott Michener used salvaged materials to build garden terraces, a greenhouse, and even a bird bath. With garbage scraps to amend the soil and seed packets from the staff, Michener and his successors created gardens for the eyes of their fellow prisoners, and for their own satisfaction.



JOSEPH H. SIMPSON, 1940s