

# site LINES

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## Gardens on Alcatraz?

*If once you have slept on an island  
You'll never be quite the same.  
In your dreams the tide and the seagulls  
Will softly be calling your name.  
Your everyday life will be happily changed  
For deep in your heart will remain,  
The fresh salt air and the sound of the surf,  
To recall – to return once again.*  
Anonymous

The romance of islands is undeniable. Throughout history islands have been places of great mystery and allure, often attached to dreams of paradise – Bali Hai, Maui, Tahiti, Majorca – places to escape the demands of everyday life.

Then there is Alcatraz. The name itself conjures up an inescapable fortress full of the nation's most notorious criminals – Al Capone, Machine Gun Kelly, and others – a terrifying specter perpetuated by both fact and myth, a hard, isolated, cold place of unrelenting grayness and harsh treatment, surrounded by barbed wire and ever-watchful guards in gun towers. It was not a place “To recall – to return once again.” On the other hand, this popular view of “The Rock” draws 1.3 million visitors a year, 5,000 a day, seeking to satisfy their macabre curiosity about a time that represents a very small piece of its history as a Federal penitentiary (1934 to 1963).

The island got its name from a Spanish sailor entering San Francisco Bay in 1775, who called it *Isla de los Alcatrazes* because of its numerous birds; *alcatrazes* translates as “pelicans” or “cormorants.” The name may also have been applied to nearby Yerba Buena Island (the island of “good herbs”), but the name stuck to this island, evolving into “Alcatraz,” a label that now has very different connotations. In 1972 Alcatraz became the centerpiece of the sprawling Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and it was opened to the public the following year. Owned and operated by the National Park Service, this lonely and abandoned fortress has become one of its most popular parks. At the same time, a longer and less dramatic island tradition has recently revealed itself – that of gardening on The Rock.

The horticultural history of Alcatraz is a compelling account of men and plants brought together on an island hostile to both. Like their keepers, the plants brought there over the past hundred and forty years became prisoners too, banished from the well-tended gardens of the mainland to what had been a windswept hump opposite the Golden Gate.

As those “inside” residents discovered, only those plants that could adapt survived. Today, we see those surviving plants as a living history of an island in constant change of over a hundred years of occupation. They tell the other story of this forbidding prison – the human and humane story of individual and group efforts to bring a bit of beauty to the otherwise grim island; of changing fashions in plant selection through the years; of survival and adaptation in an unyielding environment; of rich, new ecosystems created where none existed before; and of the therapeutic solace found in caring for plants in a place where little compassion was in evidence.

In 1853 this gently sloping island was first transformed into a military fort by grading it into high cliffs to support a three-story barracks, known as the Citadel, and its gun emplacements. The only vegetation – mostly grasses and forbs – was destroyed. By 1890, every foot of soil had been cut away or buried. Soil was imported from nearby Angel Island to build defensive mounds and create planting beds near the officers’ houses. Initial planting to control erosion was followed by the planting of gardens for Officers’ Row on the leeward side of the island. As early as the Civil War, Alcatraz was also used as a military prison. Inmates – who were called “trustees” – became the first gardeners, creating compact displays of colorful annuals and perennials.

A c. 1870 photograph by Eadweard Muybridge shows an elaborate garden on the east side of the Citadel. Deep holes had been cut into the rock, filled with soil, and planted with roses, sweet peas, and lilies. The beds were irrigated by canvas hoses from underground cisterns. Typically Victorian in its layout – chock-full of flowers, its fences dripping with roses – this garden clearly demonstrates the desire to bring civility and beauty to an otherwise barren spot. The Army developed a vocational garden-training program in which men were studying to become gardeners.

Despite these efforts, public disapproval of the island’s stark appearance from San Francisco inspired more extensive beautification work. In the fall of 1923 and spring of 1924 the California Spring Blossom and Wild Flower Association mounted an aggressive campaign to beautify the island, along with Yerba Buena and Angel Island. Army prisoners were enlisted to plant three hundred trees and shrubs, install lawns, and plant wild flowers. Donated by members of the Association, these plantings included native pines, sequoias, and cypresses, as well as one hundred pounds of nasturtium and Shirley poppy seeds.

Many of these plants died, due to the shortage of water, pervasive wind, and lack of adequate maintenance. But with the help of moisture from summer fog and their inherent

adaptability, some did survive. Army photographs show imported eucalyptus and Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*), pink ice plant covering the slopes, and century plants (*Agave americana*) along the south side of the island, lining what became known by the curious name of “Lovers’ Lane.” One cannot conceive of a less romantic plant than the spiky agave, but this was Alcatraz!

In 1933 Alcatraz was transferred to the Bureau of Prisons and an era of planting and tending the gardens and beautifying the island came to an end. Still, when the Federal employees arrived in early 1934, they were greeted with an unexpected display of flowers spilling down the rock slopes and terraces. A “Persian Carpet” of pink-flowered ice plant draping the south slopes, a beautiful rose garden, a greenhouse, and smaller gardens scattered throughout the island helped allay their fears of a bleak life on the Rock.

Fortunately, a man came along who would honor the Army’s horticultural legacy. Freddie Reichel, Secretary to Warden Johnson from 1934 to 1941, was so impressed with the island’s gardens that he committed his free time to their care and to expanding the plantings. In correspondence many years later, Reichel gave a detailed account of the gardens and his efforts over seven years to improve them: “I knew . . . that it would be impossible to maintain all that glory . . . but I resolved then and there to try to find some time in my . . . long days for the relaxation afforded by the raising of plants for others to tend and the development of areas by myself.”

He took over the greenhouse, the rose garden, “the slope behind my quarters and the small, flat garden near the Post Exchange.” Though he admitted to having little horticultural knowledge, Reichel became an expert self-taught gardener through his love of plants and his dedication to improving Alcatraz. From his isolated outpost, Reichel sought out both knowledge and plants from a group of experts that reads like a *Who’s Who* of horticulture in California – Kate Sessions of San Diego, Hugh Evans of Los Angeles, and Edward O. Orpet of Santa Barbara. Locally he made friends with members of the California Horticultural Society. By attending their meetings in San Francisco and enlisting their help, he was able to learn enough to combat the difficult growing conditions on Alcatraz. Remembering the spectacular succulent gardens created by Kate Sessions at Balboa Park in San Diego, he corresponded with her for advice. Her generosity in providing cuttings of various species of agave and ice plant enabled Reichel to beau-

In the early 1920s, the military was pressured by San Francisco to beautify the island. The south side of the island was planted with agave, eucalyptus trees, and pink ice plant. Photography by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers.





tify the previously unplanted, wind-blasted west side.

He quickly learned to adapt his plantings to the difficult growing conditions: wind, drought, and poor soil in terraced beds that were frequently bathed in fog. He turned first to California native plants – which, he later wrote, were “more famous in England than here. It is so good to have plants which literally smile back at you.” His plants of the native, white-flowered bush poppy (*Carpenteria californica*) and the brilliant, yellow-flowered flannel bush (*Fremontodendron californicum*) are no longer there, but the logic of choosing native plants demonstrated good horticultural sense.

Evidently he learned about other, similar regions of the world whose plants might survive the wind, fog, and drought. He sought tough plants that would thrive on neglect – “even downright abuse.” One of his most popular introductions was



An unknown penitentiary inmate gardener standing in bed of red roses in Officers' Row garden (undated photo by Lt. Joseph H. Simpson, courtesy of Joan S. Moore, Simpson's daughter).

the showy, blue-flowered Pride of Madeira (*Echium fastuosum*). A single plant acquired from the Los Angeles nurseryman Hugh Evans has naturalized, and its seedlings still grace the island in early spring.

He planted many succulents in addition to the ice plants and century plants – species of *Aeonium*, *Aloe*, and *Sedum*. Bulbs, many of which come from the Mediterranean region and South Africa, were well adapted to the wet winters and dry summers. He not only planted such bulbs as gladiolus, narcissus, and watsonia, but also experimented with hybridizing new varieties.

In time, Reichel cajoled his superiors into assigning “trustees” to assist him. He willingly and patiently shared his passion for plants with the inmate gardeners. In an era when prison officials gave no thought to horticulture as a form of therapy to rehabilitate the incarcerated, Freddie Reichel must have been a positive influence on the inmates who helped him. He wrote of one man's amazement “to find that plants ‘were like that’ when I explained to him the mysteries of hybridization.”

Upon Reichel's departure, in 1941, inmate Elliott Michener (AZ-578) arrived. He was assigned the weekend duty of retrieving softballs that went over the wall of the prison Recreation Yard onto the slope below and helping to maintain ice plant on the ragged, barren slope. By December, he had become a full-time gardener, working seven days a week on the area east of the fence that divided the slope. There he began a six-year endeavor to create his garden. Years later, Michener described his experience:

My gardening work began with planting the strip of hill beside the steps with mesembryanthemum, so that all of the hillside would be the same – pink, laced with (yellow) oxalis. The terrace – six to ten feet wide on either side of a curbed, graveled road – had been gardened, apparently, for many years, but under difficulties. Nowhere was the soil more than four or five inches deep. Under that was solid yellow hardpan....

I undertook what turned out to be a two-year task – breaking up the hardpan to a depth of 2 1/2 feet, screening it, fertilizing it with thousands upon thousands of five-gallon pails of garbage lugged up from the incinerator and disposal area. . . . As the garbage rotted and the beds subsided, I planted them with Iceland poppies, stock, and snapdragon, all supplied by my friend Dick Franseen. Later, I got permission from Warden Johnson to send out for seeds and plants and was able to raise picture-beds of delphinium, chrysanthemum, dahlias, and iris. . . . All the water for the hillside and the terrace came from the general supply, brought in by barge. There was never any attempt to conserve on it.

Dick was Richard C. Franseen, AZ-387, whom Michener described as “a happy-go-lucky farm boy who had a good knowledge of how to grow plants,” and who had a small garden and greenhouse on the other side of the island that Michener never saw. Franseen taught Michener a great deal about gardening – which would become for Michener a lifelong passion. He also gave him seed catalogs to study and provided him with seeds and plants he had propagated in his

greenhouse. The two men became lifelong friends.

Michener was also befriended by a tough but compassionate guard, Captain Weinhold, who helped him secure various resources for his garden – old windows that had been removed from the cell house and stored in the model shop were used to build a flimsy but serviceable greenhouse on the foundation of an earlier one. Weinhold also obtained plants and seeds for him on his trips to San Francisco. One day, after seeing the blisters on Michener's hands, he gave him a pair of gloves.

Michener's labor resulted in the conversion of a barren terrace into a garden of exquisite beauty bursting with flowers – Shasta daisies, Iceland poppies, red-hot poker, and many others. It was hard, tedious work, but he relished the task as an escape from the stress of prison life. Each day he looked forward to returning to his garden, the physical labor helping him to endure his sentence on Alcatraz.

As Michener's garden flourished, he shared his flowers by providing large bouquets for the Warden's house. Warden Swope's wife showed her appreciation by giving him seeds and plants, eventually offering him the position of houseboy, cook, and gardener at the warden's house until his release from Alcatraz in 1950. During this period – his last two years on the island – Michener spent all his free time gardening when he wasn't doing things for the Warden and his wife. “She raised tuberous begonias in a little greenhouse I built,” he later recalled, “and supplied whatever plants I wanted.”

The legacy of gardens, beautification, and other planting efforts – from the early army days of the late nineteenth century through the Federal penitentiary period – was the accumulation of untiring efforts of dedicated individuals and groups whose passion for plants left extraordinary and lasting beauty on the Rock. Aesthetically, the plantings lack a designer's approach to composition, color, texture, form, and space. But in winter and spring, as though gracing an ancient ruin, their great beauty emerged in a kaleidoscope of color in this stern, forbidding place. When we realize the extraordinary effort that was required to create that beauty, our aesthetic appreciation becomes visceral. We then can appreciate the true meaning of the gardens: the human drama they represent and the dynamic process that changed the lives of the gardeners who invested their energies and spirits.

For Elliott Michener, like Freddie Reichel, the garden became not only a release but an obsession, and he found a new part of himself in his labor there: “If we are all our own jailers, and prisoners of our traits, then I am grateful for my introduction to the spade and trowel, the seed and spray can,” he wrote. “They have given me a lasting interest in creativity.



At eighty-nine, I'm still at it." One can only imagine that many others had their spirits lifted and their lives changed in the same way – from the military gardeners and their families to the unknown men tutored by such gardeners as Reichel and Michener.

After closure of the Federal Penitentiary in 1963, the gardens and all the plantings were left fallow without any maintenance or irrigation. Surprisingly many plants did endure, despite the wind, fog, and lack of summer rain – Monterey cypress, roses, pelargoniums, Pride of Madeira, succulents, and many others. After almost thirty years of neglect, in 1992, landscape architect Ron Lutsko and his associate Robin Menigoz conducted a detailed inventory of these survivors, discovering and cataloguing nearly 150 different plants in over 100 genera amid a jungle of thorny blackberry and other “naturalized” weedy plants.

Today, a cadre of new gardeners is reviving the gardens of Alcatraz through the joint efforts of The Garden Conservancy, the National Parks Association, and the National Park Service staff on the island. After years of planning, research, and the development of a systematic approach, gar-

dens are being resurrected to simulate the appearance and effects that the long history of gardeners endowed on Alcatraz. Instead of being compelled to live on the island, these dedicated gardeners volunteer to come to the island each week to perform such arduous tasks as removing thorny blackberry, hacking back overgrowth, and improving the soil with compost, in the tradition of the inmate gardeners. They began by uncovering and utilizing the many plants that had survived as the basis for reviving the past. Once the clearing out was accomplished, the volunteers turned to the more creative work of propagating, placing, and maintaining the new plantings. Near the old water tower they have built a new greenhouse – a replica of the original where Dick Franseen worked – and replanted the beds on the foundations of Officers' Row. They also continue to resurrect the inmate gardens, such as Michener's, using photographs to guide the spirit – if not the exact plant-choice – of their retelling of this forgotten strand of Alcatraz's story.

Under the skillful direction of Shelagh Fritz, hired by The Garden Conservancy in 2006, volunteers (as many as 40 regulars) have cleared an imposing tangle of overgrown blackberry, ivy, and invasive shrubs and planted a series of five garden areas following treatment plans developed in association with the Garden Conservancy and the National Parks Association. Today, visitors are greeted with spectacular displays of flowers as they make their way from the ferry dock to the cellblock and beyond. Interpretive signs at each garden illustrate the original gardens with text and historic photographs. Docent-led tours provide a rich experience



This garden is where Elliott Michener gardened on the west side of the island for eight years as an inmate. The photo shows its restoration in full bloom by the Garden Conservancy volunteers. Photo by Russell A. Beatty, 2012.

that ties together the human stories from the various periods of gardening on the island – from the Army to the Federal penitentiary – as a softer counterpoint to the harsh prison environment related on tours of the cellblock. Volunteer docents are trained under National Park Service standards and lead an average of 30 visitors to tour the gardens. A self-guided tour brochure is also available.

The dedicated garden volunteers range in age from teenagers to retirees and bring a variety of skills – masonry, carpentry, and gardening – with some speaking French, Spanish, or German. Of the 40 regulars, 20 come to work every week, with five twice a week. In addition, groups from businesses (56 in 2011) come to work in a team-building exercise to give back to the community. The passion and joy these amiable, hardworking volunteers find in their labors reflect the words of Elliott Michener when he said, “the work became a release, an obsession. This thing I would do well.” And in the words of the anonymous poet, their lives, like the lives of the inmate gardeners, have been happily changed:

*For deep in your heart will remain,  
The fresh salt air and the sound of the surf,  
To recall – to return once again.*

– Russell A. Beatty



The gardens soften the harshness of the prison. Succulents are ideal plants for surviving the windy dry conditions of the Prisoner Gardens on the west side of the island.



## Place Keeper

*“History is a pontoon bridge. Every man walks and works at its building end, and has come as far as he has over the pontoons laid by others he may never have heard of. Events have a way of making other events inevitable; the actions of men are consecutive and indivisible.”*

Wallace Earle Stegner, *Wolf Willow*

### Shelagh Fritz, Project Manager / Horticulturist for the Gardens of Alcatraz

The legacy of gardeners and their gardens on Alcatraz spans nearly 150 years. With each generation, a new batch of gardeners arrived and left their mark, planting among the remnants of the earlier gardens they’d discovered upon their arrival. Initially military prisoners gardened on the island, leaving behind a bounty of flowering beauty that amazed and surprised prison staff and inmates when the site became a federal penitentiary. Some of the civilian prisoners and those who supervised them were inspired to continue their work. This “pontoon bridge” of gardeners – men who rarely knew those who preceded them – continues to lengthen as a new crew of cultivators, this time volunteers and Garden Conservancy staff, adds yet another pontoon to the gardening tradition of Alcatraz.

Unlike the prison gardens, which were plots created independently by individual inmates, today’s restored gardens are the fruits of a collaborative effort organized and led by one person: Shelagh Fritz, project manager and horticulturist for the Garden Conservancy. The gardens resurrected from the past are not managed in isolation but instead carefully planned to complement and enhance one another, based upon a strategy developed by the conservancy in association with the Park Service and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

Holding the only full-time position funded by the Garden Conservancy, Fritz directs a corps of forty regular volunteers who work Wednesdays and Fridays and also guides the efforts of up to 140 others who come to the island at least once a year. These dedicated men and women, who as a group average some 670 volunteer hours a month, travel to the island from San Francisco and other Bay Area cities. They arrive at the ferry dock in time to meet the 8:45 AM staff boat for a day of grubbing out overgrowth, weeding, planting, watering, propagating, and building structures – all in an effort to create and

maintain gardens that replicate the spirit of those left by the inmates. Docents, who give tours as well as work in the gardens, come every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday.

Managing the volunteers is only one part of Fritz’s responsibility. She also plans the restoration work, scheduling which garden requires attention next; orders about 50 percent of the plants from wholesale nurseries; and propagates the rest in the rebuilt greenhouse. She also schedules and sometimes leads docent tours; coordinates projects with the National Park Service staff; works with consultants hired by the Conservancy; and records the evolving landscape with photographs and a written log. And all the while she is recreating Alcatraz’s earlier gardens from the images in historical photographs.

Fritz arrived at Alcatraz in 2006 from England, where she had been a gardener at Syon Park, the private estate of the Duke of Northumberland. The property, now open to the public, was originally designed by Capability Brown in the mid-eighteenth century. Her work there, akin to the endeavor on Alcatraz, was to re-create a garden similar in character to Brown’s design, rather than imposing a completely new and different style. When she subsequently moved to San Francisco, Fritz interviewed for a job on the island. She was awarded a position under project manager Carola Ashford, who was beginning to restore the gardens with volunteer assistance. Fritz had never worked with volunteers, but she quickly adapted. After Ashford died unexpectedly in 2009, Fritz became the project manager.

Alcatraz could not be more different than the estate in England – a windblown rock instead of a verdant green park. But, as Fritz says, “I heard somewhere that all your life experiences are like a thread; when you start out, you don’t know where you are going, but following it backwards, you can easily see how each experience led to the next.” Fritz graduated from the University of Guelph, Ontario, in 1999, with a degree in horticultural science and business. She first worked managing a small crew caring for the gardens of the Glen Abbey Golf Club, which was home to the Canadian Open that year. This



gave her practical experience in gardening, supervising workers, ordering plants, and designing a display.

Shelagh Fritz, chief horticulturist and project manager for the Garden Conservancy, overseeing the restored Officers’ Row garden.

Her next opportunity was at the Manulife Insurance Company in Toronto, where she was responsible for the manicured lawns and flower gardens. She became the garden manager and supervised a small crew between 2000 and 2003. At the young age of twenty-three, she had a crash course in human resources. “The gardening part was easy,” she recalled. “Managing a staff was something I wasn’t prepared for.”

Fritz then became an intern at Longwood Gardens in Philadelphia in their International Program (September 2003–August 2004). Working at Longwood gave her not only excellent horticultural experience but also practice in meeting a high standard of quality. The position at Syon Park followed, lasting from 2004 to 2006.

This is the thread that led Fritz to her role as project manager for the gardens at Alcatraz. There, to the delight and amazement of visitors to the island, she is bringing to life gardens that once lay in ruins. One only has to see the happy camaraderie among the volunteers as they arrive on the island for a day of hard labor to know that their dedication is largely due to the fun of working with Fritz. Their enthusiasm grows along with the knowledge that they are part of the long con-

tinuum of gardeners who have brought great beauty to one of the world's most hostile places.

One of the biggest challenges for Fritz is to keep the gardens in bloom year-round – not an easy task in this Mediterranean climate on an island buffeted by wind; it is dry in summer and meagerly supplied with water. What water there is comes from two sources. One is a supply system filled by the ferry each day, used for the restrooms and for irrigating some of the gardens on the island's east side. The other source is a system for harvesting water off the Cellhouse roof on the west side of the island, involving four tanks with a total capacity of twelve thousand gallons. Maintaining the gardens that have already been restored is labor-intensive; ongoing tasks include weeding, deadheading, and pruning as well as watering all the plantings by hand. Initially the multitude of seagulls that nest in and around the gardens posed a problem for the intruding volunteers. But Fritz says that they have come to terms of coexistence – “the gulls have gotten used to us and we have gotten used to them.” A few of the regulars even have names. She works closely with a National Park Service wildlife biologist to ensure that the bird population is protected. The nesting area for the black-crowned night heron is kept off limits during the nesting season, but it doesn't conflict with the gardens.

The history of the gardens and their gardeners is told in a variety of ways: the docent-led tours, a brochure for self-guided tours, and interpretive signs along the route to the gardens. Luring visitors from the Cellhouse – the main attraction – remains a challenge, especially if they have not been informed of the gardens as they arrive at the ferry dock. Still, Fritz's tours average fifty visitors.

The gardens are not just about horticulture; they reveal in a strikingly comprehensive way the social history of Alcatraz from the military period to that of the federal penitentiary and beyond. Understanding their history gives visitors a holistic perspective of life on the Rock. The gardens created by inmates and staff were a refuge from conditions inside the Cellhouse – truly a pontoon bridge stretching 150 years in length, built by those who found creativity and solace in gardening. Fritz and her dedicated volunteers continue to extend that bridge even as they inspire others to join them and discover the satisfaction to be found in doing so.

– Russell A. Beatty