Survivor Plants

Alcatraz gardeners needed tough plants that could survive with little water or care. In the 1970s, 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 despite forty years of neglect after the prison closed. Survivors included fifteen rose cultivars. One of them was ‘Bardou Job’ (below, left), a rose developed in Europe but no longer available anywhere there. After the rose lost its thorns on Alcatraz, the Museum of Webb’s Life was pleased to welcome six cuttings of it back to Wales in 2000.

Outreach and Education

As the gardens reappeared, the Gardens of Alcatraz project team also developed a self-guiding visitor’s brochure, and interpretive signs around the island to tell visitors the story of the gardens. Volunteer docents lead garden tours twice a week and staff some of the garden sites for drop-in visits. Visitors now gain a more complete sense of life on the island, beyond the famous inmates and escape attempts. Outreach extends well beyond the island. A comprehensive website offers a virtual tour of the famous inmates and escape attempts. As the gardens reappeared, the Gardens of Alcatraz project

Community Engagement

Since 2003, a dedicated and growing team of volunteers has repaired and replanted walls, planters, and patios; re-ensabled arid areas; built a greenhouse; salvaged and propagated plants; and restored and tended the gardens. All the garden areas have been reinvigorated largely by individual volunteers, many of them dedicated and loyal residents, and by work groups from local businesses and organizations. As a group, volunteers contribute an average of 670 hours per month to the project.

Sustainability

Other than rain and fog drip, all water on Alcatraz comes by hose. So far, the garden renovation was carefully designed to respect limits on water use and maintenance. Historic systems that captured gray water from the prison showers for irrigation were rehabilitated to filter and store rainwater from the cellhouse roof. Masonry repairs of laundry walls and plants are carefully chosen for the harsh conditions. Overly thirsty historic species are replaced by drought-tolerant species of similar character. In 2012, for example, invasive weeds on the West Side were smothered with cardboard and mulch. In the winter of 2015, irrigation were rehabilitated to filter and store rainwater from the cellhouse roof.

Ten Years of Restoration at the Gardens of Alcatraz

2003 A partnership is formed among the Garden Conservancy, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the National Park Service to restore the gardens of Alcatraz. Volunteer program organized. Volunteers start removing 40 years of overgrowth.

2004 The stabilization of Officers’ Row and eastern terraces begins. The Garden Conservancy hires Shelagh Fritz as a Marin Polo Stano, before the island. The Fernleigh Foundation begins generous support of the restoration.

2005 Carola Ashford assumes newly created project manager position Cultural Landscape Inventory completed. Major Road landscape treatment plan approved; work begins. Garden brochure printed; gardens added to NPS visitor orientation video.

2006 Officers’ Row treatment plan approved; work begins. The Garden Conservancy hires Shelagh Fritz as the full-time gardener on the island in 40 years. Save America’s Treasures matching grant awarded. Garden brochure printed; gardens added to NPS visitor orientation video.

2007 Ross Terrace and Cellhouse Slope treatment plans approved; work begins. Document program begins, with three docents leading tours twice a week. Grants received from S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, Mary A. Crocker Trust, Fernleigh Foundation, Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, and other donors to match Save America’s Treasures grant.

2008 West Side gardens treatment plan approved; work begins. Cellhouse Slope planted with lavender six plant. Eight "wayside" panels installed, offering visitors historical information about the gardens. Gardens of Alcatraz website launched.

2009 Ross Terrace and Cellhouse Slope treatment plans approved; work begins. Cellhouse Slope planted with lavender six plant. Eight "wayside" panels installed, offering visitors historical information about the gardens. Gardens of Alcatraz website launched.


2011 Community Engagement Since 2003, a dedicated and growing team of volunteers has repaired and replanted walls, planters, and patios; re-ensabled arid areas; built a greenhouse; salvaged and propagated plants; and restored and tended the gardens. All the garden areas have been reinvigorated largely by individual volunteers, many of them dedicated and loyal residents, and by work groups from local businesses and organizations. As a group, volunteers contribute an average of 670 hours per month to the project.

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2013 Sustainability Other than rain and fog drip, all water on Alcatraz comes by hose. So far, the garden renovation was carefully designed to respect limits on water use and maintenance. Historic systems that captured gray water from the prison showers for irrigation were rehabilitated to filter and store rainwater from the cellhouse roof. Supplemented by new tanks, this rainwater catchment system holds 12,000 gallons of water to irrigate the island’s gardens. In addition, composting recycles the gardens’ livestock, and plants are carefully chosen for the harsh conditions. Other than historic species are replaced by drought-tolerant species of similar character. In 2012, for example, invasive weeds on the West Side were smothered with cardboard and mulch. In the winter of 2015, the historic look of a lawn will be retained by planting native grasses that require little water.

2011 “40-year” reopening outing at island for garden volunteers. Refurbishing and planting of toolshed on West Side completed. Masonry repairs of laundry terraces on West Side begin. Cellhouse Slope planting extended.


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2013 The Gardens of Alcatraz: Punishment and Reward on the Rock”, presentations in New York City and Chicago, as well as at California garden clubs and love organizations. Quarterly e-newsletter launched.

2014 “Alcatraz Florilegium” exhibit, presented in the Cellhouse in collaboration with the Northern California Society of Botanical Artists, celebrates the plants of Alcatraz and the tenth anniversary of the restoration of the gardens. Alcatraz Gardens: Remembered, Reclaimed, Repopulated paperback book finished to be published in December.

2015 Gardens of Alcatraz: Punishment and Reward on the Rock”, presentations in New York City and Chicago, as well as at California garden clubs and love organizations. Quarterly e-newsletter launched.

2016 “Alcatraz Florilegium” exhibit, presented in the Cellhouse in collaboration with the Northern California Society of Botanical Artists, celebrates the plants of Alcatraz and the tenth anniversary of the restoration of the gardens. Alcatraz Gardens: Remembered, Reclaimed, Repopulated paperback book finished to be published in December.

2017 Gardens of Alcatraz: Punishment and Reward on the Rock”, presentations in New York City and Chicago, as well as at California garden clubs and love organizations. Quarterly e-newsletter launched.

2018 “Alcatraz Florilegium” exhibit, presented in the Cellhouse in collaboration with the Northern California Society of Botanical Artists, celebrates the plants of Alcatraz and the tenth anniversary of the restoration of the gardens. Alcatraz Gardens: Remembered, Reclaimed, Repopulated paperback book finished to be published in December.