

## Gardening on Alcatraz Island since the 1860s

Citadel Garden (left), 1869, Eadweard Muybridge, Bancroft Library

Prisoners on the "Walk of Shame," 1950s (right)



The barren and severe 22-acre Alcatraz Island was first occupied in the 1850s as an army fortress. It became a military prison in the late 1800s; later, from 1934 to 1963, it gained notoriety as a maximum security federal penitentiary. In 1972, Alcatraz became a unit of the National Park Service's Golden Gate National Recreation Area and has since become its most visited site. The island is designated a National Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

From the 1860s, army officers and their families created gardens around their quarters as refuge from the harsh surroundings. As Army labor reshaped the rock with fortifications and prison buildings, soil and plants were imported to beautify the island, for the benefit of residents as well as San Franciscans viewing it across the bay.

When Bureau of Prisons staff arrived in 1934, they were surprised to find the lawns, flowering terraces, rose garden, and banks

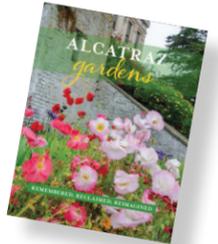
of colorful succulents left by the Army. The warden's secretary, Fred Reichel, took over garden maintenance, and introduced many then-unknown Mediterranean species adapted to wind and drought. Eventually Reichel trained a few inmates to garden. For some, such as Elliott Michener (on Alcatraz from 1941 to 1949), gardening became an escape from the stresses of prison life. Michener spent years building rock terraces on the hillside below the west guard tower and planting brilliant

flowerbeds to be viewed from the path that inmates walked every day.

After the prison closed in 1963, the gardens were abandoned. Plants needing water and maintenance died out, while others spread. The garden spaces and structures disappeared under overgrowth. While the park struggled to stabilize landmark buildings, the landscape deteriorated until there was little sense that the island had been gardened for more than a century.

[www.alcatrazgardens.org](http://www.alcatrazgardens.org)

## • • 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 Carola Ashford as a Marco Polo Stufano Fellow at the island.

The Fernleigh Foundation begins its generous support of the restoration.

**2005**  
Carola Ashford assumes newly created position as project manager.  
Cultural Landscape Inventory completed.

Main Road landscape treatment plan approved; work begins to repair structures, stabilize slopes, and replant.

**2006**  
Officers' Row treatment plan approved; work begins.  
The Garden Conservancy hires Shelagh Fritz as the first fulltime 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**  
Rose Terrace and Cellhouse Slope treatment plans approved; work begins.

Docent 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 ice plant.  
Eight "wayside" panels installed, offering visitors historical information about the gardens.

Gardens of Alcatraz website launched.



**2009**  
Shelagh Fritz succeeds Carola Ashford as project manager.  
Karolina Park begins as part-time gardener.  
Rainwater catchment system installed.

The project wins two prestigious California Preservation Foundation awards.

Officers' Row gardens open to visitors every Wednesday for an informal "Ask the Gardener" session.

**2010**  
Volunteers build new propagation greenhouse in Rose Terrace; greenhouse dedicated to the memory of Carola Ashford.  
Cultural Landscape Report completed. Additional garden areas identified for rehabilitation.

Project receives partnership award from the Association of Partners for Public Lands.  
Weekly blog launched.

Major media coverage extends nationally (e.g., *Preservation* magazine, ABC News) and internationally (e.g., *Gardens Illustrated*).

Gardens of Alcatraz compost wins first of several "best backyard compost" awards at the Marin County Fair.

**2011**  
July 4 "sleepover" outing at island for garden volunteers.  
Refurbishing and painting of toolshed on West Side completed.

Masonry repairs of laundry terraces on West Side begin.

Cellhouse Slope planting extended.



**2012**  
Facebook page launched.  
Grant from Stephen Bechtel Fund supports interpretation and outreach, including the addition of video clips to the website, improvements to the slide presentation, and creation of a photo book.

The Foundation for Landscape Studies publishes feature story on the restoration of the gardens and profiles Shelagh Fritz as a "Place Maker."

Shelagh Fritz presents at American Public Gardens Association conference in Florida.

West Side lawn renovation begins.

**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 civic organizations.  
Quarterly e-newsletter launched.

"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, Reimagined* keepsake book finished; to be published in December.

**SURVIVOR PLANTS** Alcatraz gardeners needed tough plants that could survive with little water and 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 despite forty years of neglect after the prison closed. Survivors included fifteen rose cultivars. One of them was *Rosa 'Bardou Job'* (below, left), a rose developed in Europe but no longer available anywhere there. After the lost rose was discovered on Alcatraz, the Museum of Welsh 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 garden sites for drop-in visits. Visitors now gain a more complete sense of life on the island, beyond famous inmates and escape attempts.

Outreach extends well beyond the island. A comprehensive website offers a virtual tour of the gardens and extensive information, photographs, and videos that enable thousands of people to appreciate the role of the gardens in our cultural heritage. The project manager maintains a weekly blog, sends a monthly newsletter to volunteers and a quarterly electronic newsletter to anyone who opts-in online, and presents illustrated talks to garden clubs and civic groups around the country.

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT** Since 2003, a dedicated and growing team of volunteers has repaired and replaced walls, planters, and paths; re-contoured eroded slopes; built a greenhouse; salvaged and propagated plants; and replanted and tended the gardens. All five garden areas have been rehabilitated largely by individual volunteers, many of them dedicated and loyal regulars, 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 barge, so the garden restoration was carefully designed to respect limits on water use and maintenance. Historic cisterns 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' biomass, 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, the historic look of a lawn will be restored by planting native grasses that require little water.

