

San Francisco Botanical Garden



The entrance to the San Francisco Botanical Garden.

The San Francisco Botanical Garden (SFBG), a living museum within Golden Gate Park, is a 55-acre urban sanctuary in the middle of the big city. It is a collaboration between the SFBG Society and San Francisco Recreation and Parks. Showcasing over 50,000 plants in 8,000 taxa, this garden presents a huge diversity of plants from all over the world in a beautiful and relaxing setting.

The site for a future botanical garden was selected within Golden Gate Park in 1890, but it didn't become a reality until 1926 when Helene Strybing, the prosperous widow of a San Francisco merchant, provided the necessary funds in her bequest to the

city to establish an arboretum and botanical garden. In the late 1930's plantings were started, and by 1940 the Garden was officially opened as Strybing Arboretum. It was initially designed around a central axis (that still exists between the central fountain and the Zellerbach Garden of Perennials), with paths radiating from there to collections of plants from around the world. Later master plans incorporated other features such as the great meadow, the Friend Gate at the northern entrance to the Garden, and the Moon-Viewing Garden. Plant collections were revised over time to take better advantage of the mild coastal climate, expanding the collections from mild temperate climate regions. In 2004, Strybing Arboretum changed its name to San Francisco Botanical Garden at Strybing Arboretum, and recent signage has dropped the reference to Helene Strybing. The SFBG continues to be a work in progress, incorporating newly designed gardens periodically and an ever-changing collection of plants.



Old trees tower over the central fountain and lawn.

Because of its unique microclimate – with mild temperatures, wet winters, and coastal fog – it has a range of conditions that allow it to grow and conserve plants that cannot be grown in many other botanical gardens, such as rare, heat-intolerant palm species from cloud forest habitats. Many of the main collections include plants from similar climates, and the SFBG even has some plants that are no longer found in their native habitats. Plants are organized primarily according to geographic areas, with a focus on Mediterranean, mild-temperate and montane tropic climates.

Mediterranean Climate Habitats

The SFBG showcases rare and unusual plants from Mediterranean habitats worldwide. Characterized by warm dry summers and mild wet winters, this type of climate is similar to that of San Francisco and is found in five major locations around the world: southwest Australia, coastal California, central Chile, the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, and the Cape Province of South Africa.

The **Australian Garden** is most spectacular in December and January or March through May as many plants such as various species of *Grevillea*, *Correa*, and *Banksia* come into bloom. Many of these distinctive plants are adapted to aridity and fire, some even needing fire for seed germination. The original “Eastern Australia” garden dates back to the 1930’s, but the current design and plantings were implemented in 2004.



The entrance to the Australian Garden (L), *Banksia speciosa* (C), and *Grevillea victoriae* (R).



The tall trees of the redwood grove create deep shade.

The **Redwood Grove and California Natives** gardens focus on plants of the area. The coastal redwood grove features *Sequoia sempervirens* trees that were planted around the turn of the 20th century towering over native understory trees, shrubs and groundcovers representing the key species of this very special plant community.



Tecate cypress, *Cupressus forbesii*, shades a bench in the California garden.

The four-acre, award-winning **Arthur L. Menzies Garden of California Native Plants** features arroyos, ponds and woodlands around a wildflower meadow. Over 500 species and cultivars, including western azalea (*Rhododendron occidentale*), California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*) and California wild lilac (*Ceanothus* sp.) are displayed in naturalistic plantings. This historic collection of plants is at its peak bloom in April and May.

The **Cape Province** (South Africa) collection includes numerous species of proteas, restios, and other plants including *Agapanthus*, geraniums, and aloes mainly from winter rainfall areas of the Cape.



The entrance to the South African Garden (L), with blooming yellow *Kniphofia* and blue *Agapanthus* (C) and flower of *Protea obtusifolia* (R).

Cloud Forest Collections

The SFBG is an important conservator of cloud forest plants from many areas of the world – where high mountain slopes are kept cool by cloud cover – because it is one of the only botanical gardens in the world where these plants can grow outdoors successfully as San Francisco’s summer fog and moist mild winters almost perfectly mimic these conditions. Many of these plants are rare and endangered. They can be seen in three different areas:

Started in 1984 in the southwest corner of the SFBG, the **Mesoamerican Cloud Forest** features plants from high altitudes in Central and South America where fog frequently envelops the forest, resulting in an abundance of mosses, ferns and epiphytes. A variety of species native to tropical mountains in Mexico, Central, and South America recreate the feeling of an actual cloud forest, with oaks, pines and alders providing shade and shelter for shrubs, groundcover, ferns, vines and epiphytes which together form a dense, jungle-like effect. The best time to visit this area is in November and December.



The entrance to the Meso-American Cloud Forest (L), a trail through the forest (LC), and *Fuchsia boliviana* tree (RC) and flower (R).

The **Andean Cloud Forest and Chilean Garden**, framed by the most comprehensive collection of high-elevation palms found in any botanical garden, include plants from these “biodiversity hotspots” in South America that are in danger of extinction. The Chilean Garden was among the original collections, but this small garden has renovated in recent years. Look for blooming angel’s trumpet (*Brugmansia* sp.), passion vines, usual fuchsias, Andean wax palm (*Ceroxylon quindiuense*) – the tallest palm in the world – from the Colombian Andes, Chilean wine palms (*Jubaea chilensis*), and many different *Puya* species (terrestrial bromeliads) in this area. This part of the garden is most exciting in September and October.



The entrance to the Andean Cloud Forest (L), *Passiflora parritae* from Columbia (LC), *Salvia corrugata* from the Andes (RC) and Chilean bellflower, *Lapageria rosea*, the national flower of Chile (R).

The **Southeast Asian Cloud Forest** was the first collection of its kind in a botanical garden anywhere in the world. Still in development, it will feature rhododendrons and other plants collected from Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and New Guinea.

Mild-Temperate Collections

The plants in these areas are from climates with year-round rainfall and a change of seasons, and are maintained in the SFBG by watering during the dry summer. This section includes plants from **New Zealand** – one of the best places outside of New Zealand to see some of the native plants of that island nation. The **Moon-Viewing Garden** is a Japanese design while the **Takamine Garden** has plants from other parts of Asia.

Special Collections

These sections are devoted to specific plant groups, either taxonomic or functional. In addition to the gardens listed below there is also a Garden of Fragrance focusing on plants with scented foliage and flowers and important collections of rhododendrons, and camellias.



Tree ferns and nikau, *Rhopalostylis sapida*, New Zealand's only native palm edge the pond.

The layout of the **Ancient Plant Garden** transports visitors chronologically through five periods or epochs: Early Devonian, Pennsylvanian, Jurassic, Cretaceous, and Eocene, with various 'living fossil' plants representing the different times and showcasing how plants evolved over time. Imagine hard and you can imagine dinosaurs in amongst the tall ferns. Look for ancient plants such as the Wollemi pine (*Wollemia nobilis*, once thought extinct until re-discovered in the Blue Mountains 100 miles from Sydney, Australia in the mid-1990's), cycads and ginkgo.

The **Succulent Garden** has plants from arid regions of the world including Africa, Madagascar and North and South America.



The Succulent Garden (L), with plants growing in the rock wall (C), and an Australian grass tree, *Xanthorrhoea* sp. (R).

The **Conifer Lawn**, located in the western section of the Garden between New Zealand and the **Redwood Grove**, is a collection of 30 species of conifers placed in and growing around a large lawn.

The **Zellerbach Garden of Perennials** is one of the few areas that is not focused on a particular geographic area or a specific horticultural group. This garden, characterized by flowers in pastel colors, was designed strictly for its aesthetic appeal. Mid-summer is the best time to appreciate the colors in this area at the western end of the major east-west axis from the Main Gate. Established in 1966, it was redesigned in 2001 to include three arbors, several stone columns and wide walkways.

The **Magnolia Collection** is one the most significant collection outside of China, where the majority of species in this genus are found. These woody plants are most impressive in winter (December through the end of March) when in bloom. Started in 1939, this unique collection includes 51 species and 33 cultivars of this group of ancient plants that are among the oldest flowering plants.

The **James Nobel Dwarf Conifer Garden** has over 100 species of rare and unusual naturally dwarf plants on the slopes surrounding a reflecting pond.

The **Conifer Collection** has over 250 of the 600 species of conifers in the world, with the plants spread throughout the Botanical Garden. These plants range from the various redwoods to the broadleafed *Ginkgo biloba* which is also a cone bearing plant. There is a small grove of dawn redwoods (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) – once thought to be extinct and known only from fossil records, until living specimens were discovered by Chinese botanists in the Szechuan province – in the Temperate Asia collection.



Benches scattered throughout the Garden offer a pleasant respite in the middle of a big city.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Additional Information:

- San Francisco Botanical Garden at Strybing Arboretum – the official website at www.sfbotanicalgarden.org/