

San Diego's Historic Gardens, Parks, and Landscapes

 San Diego is home to many beautiful historic and cultural gardens, each with its own unique character and history. Whether you are looking to learn about the city's rich cultural heritage or simply to enjoy some time in nature, these historic gardens offer a wide range of benefits for visitors of all ages and backgrounds.

SOHO has compiled a list of some of these historic gardens to make it easier for you to get out and smell the roses!

Naturally we expect our historic and cultural gardens to bring some beauty into our lives. And they do, but they also offer numerous health benefits, both physical and mental, that can enhance a person's overall well-being. Spending time in these outdoor spaces can provide a sense of calm, reduce stress, and boost mood.



Formal gardens at the Marston House Museum & Gardens. Photo by Robert Veres

Research has shown that spending time in and around nature can help reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions. In addition, exposure to natural light and fresh air can boost the immune system and improve overall physical health. Historic and cultural gardens are also often home to a diverse range of plant species, which can stimulate the senses and improve cognitive function.

Beyond these health benefits, historic and cultural gardens offer a unique opportunity to learn about the horticultural history and culture of our region, and to connect with the natural world in a meaningful way. They can serve as a source of inspiration and creative energy, providing a space to reflect and recharge.

These historic places are a crucial part of San Diego's cultural landscape legacy, and they play an integral role in the health and well-being of its residents.

Categories include Balboa Park, botanical, native plant, meditation, museum, and wildflower sites. Have fun!



Balboa Park

This 1,200-acre park is home to many gardens and offers a variety of guided tours, including tours of the park's gardens, as well as tours of the park's historic buildings and museums.

Alcazar Garden

1935

Modeled after the gardens of the Alcazar Castle in Seville, Spain, and designed by Richard Requa in 1935, the garden was originally part of the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. The Alcazar Garden is known for its beautiful historic tilework, fountains, and colorful flower beds.

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/alcazar-garden>

Botanical Building and Lily Pond

1915

Home to more than 2,100 plants, including exotic palms, cycads, orchids, and ferns. The 1915-built building is one of the largest lath structures in the world. The adjacent lily pond is filled with water lilies and other aquatic plants, as well as koi fish. The historic building is under restoration currently and closed. Check for reopening in 2024, meanwhile viewing the restoration work is very interesting.



Botanical Building and Lily Pond. Photo by Sandé Lollis

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/botanical-building-and-lily-pond>

Desert Garden

1976

Established with more than 1,300 plants, including succulents and drought-resistant specimens, the beautiful and unique Desert Garden spans over two acres. It features a diverse collection of desert plants from around the world, including from the Southwestern United States, South America, Africa, and the Middle East.

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/desert-garden>

Inez Grant Parker Memorial Rose Garden

1975

This stunning garden features more than 2,500 roses in a variety of colors and fragrances. The garden is named in honor of Inez Grant Parker, a renowned horticulturist and civic leader.

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/inez-grant-parker-memorial-rose-garden>

Japanese Friendship Garden

1991

Founded in 1991 as a gift from San Diego's sister city, Yokohama. the original garden was created for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition. The garden spans over 12 acres and today features a traditional Japanese landscape with winding paths, a koi pond, a tea house, and a meditation pavilion.

<https://www.niwa.org>

Kate O. Sessions Cactus Garden

1935

First established in 1935 as part of the California Pacific International Exposition, the garden was designed by Kate Sessions. It features a wide variety of cacti and succulents from around the world, including the iconic saguaro cactus, which is native to the Sonoran Desert of Arizona, California, and Mexico. Other species include the barrel cactus, prickly pear cactus, agave, and yucca.

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/kate-o-sessions-cactus-garden>

Marston House Museum & Gardens

1905-1940s

This 1905–1940s garden is part of the Marston House estate and features native California plants, including a eucalyptus grove, as well as an herb garden and formal Arts and Crafts era rose garden. Reserve a guided walking tour or walk the gardens on your own.

<http://www.sohosandiego.org/main/marston2.htm>

Palm Canyon

1912

This garden features a lush grove of towering palms and many other tropical plants. There are more than 450 palms, including 58 species.

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/palm-canyon>

Botanic

A botanical garden or botanic garden is a garden with a documented collection of living plants for the purpose of scientific research, conservation, display, education, public display, sustainable use, tourism, and recreational activities.

Alta Vista Botanical Gardens

1999

This beautiful and unique garden is located on the old Smitgen property, which once occupied a 16-acre site in the heart of Brengle Terrace Park in Vista, California. The garden spans over 14 acres and is home to a diverse collection of plants from around the world.

<https://altavistabotanicalgardens.org>

Botanical Building and Lily Pond

1915

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/botanical-building-and-lily-pond>

(Listed above in Balboa Park)

San Diego Botanic Garden

1961

Located in Encinitas, the garden is a 37-acre oasis of natural beauty and biodiversity. It features over 5,000 plant species from around the world, and 29 uniquely themed gardens that represent 15 different regions and habitats of the world, with an array of landscapes, including a tropical rainforest, a desert garden, and a Mediterranean garden.

<https://sdbg.org>

Meditation

Peaceful and serene spaces to practice mindfulness, relax, and enjoy nature.

Japanese Friendship Garden

1991

<https://www.niwa.org>

(Listed above in Balboa Park)

San Diego Botanic Garden

1961

<https://sdbg.org>

(Listed above in Botanic Gardens)

The garden also has several quiet spaces for meditation.

Self-Realization Fellowship Meditation Gardens

1920

Located in Encinitas, the gardens overlook the Pacific Ocean and are filled with lush greenery, colorful flowers, and tranquil water features. The gardens are open to visitors of all faiths and backgrounds.

<https://encinitastemple.org/visiting>

Native Plant

Learn about the diverse flora that is indigenous to the San Diego region. San Diego County is a biodiversity hot-spot, it is in the most bio-diverse county in the United States, with 26 different vegetation zones, from coastal marshes to the desert.

San Diego Botanic Garden

1961

(Listed above in Botanic Gardens)

The garden features eleven acres of natural areas and restored natural areas that showcases the beauty and diversity of plants that are native to the region.

<https://sdbg.org>

Water Conservation Garden

1999

Located in El Cajon, the 6-acre botanical garden is dedicated to promoting water conservation and sustainable gardening practices. The garden showcases a variety of drought-tolerant plants, including succulents, cacti, and other Mediterranean and native California plants.

<https://www.thegarden.org>

Wildflower

San Diego has a diverse range of natural habitats and ecosystems, which means there are many opportunities to see beautiful wildflowers throughout the year. The best time to see wildflowers can vary depending on factors such as weather and rainfall, so it's a good idea to check with local resources, such as park rangers or the San Diego Wildflower Watch, for the latest information on where and when to go to see the most impressive displays.

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park

1933

<https://theabf.org/explore-anza-borrego/wildflowers>

Los Peñasquitos Canyon Preserve

1970

<https://www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/parks/osp/lospenasquitos>

Marian Bear Memorial Park

1970s

<https://www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/parks/osp/marianbear>



Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Photo by Sandé Lollis

Mission Trails Regional Park

1974

<https://mtrp.org>

Palm Canyon

1912

<https://balboapark.org/parks-trails-gardens/palm-canyon>

(Listed above in Balboa Park)

Rose Canyon Open Space Park

1960s

<https://www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/parks/osp/rosecan1>

Tecolote Canyon Natural Park

1978

<https://www.sandiego.gov/park-and-recreation/parks/osp/tecolote>

Torrey Pines State Natural Reserve

1899

<https://torreypine.org>

Other

Flower Fields at Carlsbad Ranch

1920s

<https://www.theflowerfields.com>