Verdant Pleasures
Finding inspiration in botanical gardens  By Debra Prinzing

Whether you’re traveling for business or pleasure, set aside an afternoon to visit your destination’s botanical garden or arboretum. Not only will you enjoy a calm respite among foliage and flowers, usually away from crowds and long lines, but you’ll also find inspiration for your own backyard. North America has an impressive history of gardens established for the enjoyment of its citizens: Boston’s Public Garden—the nation’s first—opened in 1837, adjacent to Boston Common, which was the country’s first public park. Nowadays, there’s a wealth of diversity in the country’s many gardens. Some venues are large and filled with mature plants; others are small and emerging in significance. Some are tucked into big cities; others are in more remote locations. You may have toured some of the oldest and most beloved, including crown jewels such as Central Park in New York City, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, and the San Francisco Botanical Garden in Golden Gate Park. But there are acres and acres more of botanical beauty to enjoy. A visit to a local garden will fill your lungs with fresh air, your eyes with horticultural wonders and your mind with great ideas for your home garden. Here are some favorite gardens, with tips on what to look for when you visit.

Dunn Gardens
The Arthur Dunn family estate was established in 1915 on a bluff overlooking the Puget Sound north of Seattle. The gardens were designed by the Olmsted Brothers, the premier U.S. landscape architectural firm, based in Brookline, Massachusetts. The grounds were divided among Dunn family members in the 1940s. Today, you can visit the award-
winning 7.5-acre garden enhanced by E.B. “Ed” Dunn, who lived on the property between 1947 and 1991.

A devoted collector of rhododendrons, woodland plants and bulbs, Ed Dunn created a historical garden trust in 1993, ensuring that other horticultural enthusiasts would be able to enjoy his landscape for many years. It is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The garden features walks among mature rhododendrons, a pond garden, a woodland glade, a perennial border, and specimen trees set in the “great lawn.” Many of the characteristic Olmsted design features have been restored and renovated, including a curvilinear drive, diagonal view corridors and natural footpaths. The garden is admired for its exceptional collections of trillium, hellebores, erythronium and other woodland perennials. Take note of many spectacular eastern hardwoods and native conifer specimens in the Dunn Gardens’ Heritage Tree Program.

**Visiting tips:** Admission is $10, or $7 for seniors and students. A $50 annual membership lets you take advantage of ongoing lectures and hands-on workshops taught by knowledgeable docents and curators Glenn Withey and Charles Price. The garden is open by appointment only, with tours given April–July and September–October. Reservations can be made online or by telephone. Last-minute visitors are encouraged to call and can often be accommodated. Members and guests are invited to the annual Fall Foliage Festival, held this year Sunday, October 12, from 2 to 4 p.m., to celebrate the brilliant autumn colors of beech and oak trees, sugar and vine maples, and more.

**Contact:** P.O. Box 77126; 13533 Northshire Road N.W., Seattle, Washington 98177; 206-362-0933; www.dunngardens.org.

**The Berry Botanic Garden**

The Berry Botanic Garden occupies a 6.25-acre site nestled in a residential area of the Dunthorpe neighborhood of southwest Portland. Open to the public since 1977, it was originally the home and garden of Rae Selling Berry (1881–1976), a pioneering plantswoman who was deeply dedicated to identifying, acquiring and propagating species plants from around the world suitable for the Pacific Northwest. Due to progressive hearing loss, Berry was completely deaf by her early 30s. In spite of this challenge, she explored the mountains of the American West, British Columbia and Alaska to collect alpine plants as well as an unrivaled collection of Primula species, delicate flowering plants also known as primroses.

The Berry Botanic Garden is renowned for conservation programs focusing on native plants, such as the golden paintbrush.
Today, the botanical garden features extensive displays of rhododendrons, primroses, alpine and woodland plants, specimen trees, shrubs and unusual perennials. Favorite Northwest natives in the garden include redflower currant (*Ribes sanguineum*), snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*) and evergreen huckleberry (*Vaccinium ovatum*). The garden is noted for its conservation programs of native endangered plants; it is home to the Seed Bank for Rare and Endangered Plants of the Pacific Northwest, with the largest collection of seeds in the region.

**Visiting tips:** Since its parking lot can accommodate only 15 cars, advance reservations are required. You can schedule a daytime visit any day of the year. Admission is free for members, $5 for nonmembers. The garden’s popular and varied seminar topics include plant conservation and propagation, drip irrigation and botanical illustration. From 11 A.M. to 3 P.M. on October 18, 2008, the garden will present “Art & Music in the Garden,” featuring acoustical performances and art demonstrations. The event is free for members; the $8 fee for nonmembers includes regular admission.

**Contact:** 11505 S.W. Summerville Ave., Portland, Oregon 97219; 503-636-4112; www.berrybot.org.

**Sawtooth Botanical Garden**

Who would imagine that His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama would travel to a remote garden in Ketchum–Sun Valley, Idaho, to bless a 400-pound, hand-carved Tibetan prayer wheel? The private ceremony took place on September 11, 2005, to honor the opening of the Garden of Infinite Compassion, one of eight distinctive garden areas at the Sawtooth Botanical Garden. With the prayer wheel as its centerpiece, the Garden of Infinite Compassion is a meditative rock garden for visitors of all faiths, symbolizing hope for peace and compassion worldwide.

The Sawtooth Botanical Garden was conceived and started in 1995 by a group of passionate local gardeners with goals of showcasing sustainable gardening practices and allowing community members to rent plots for growing vegetables and flowers. Today, the 5-acre site (a former horse pasture in Idaho’s Wood River Valley) is an emerging botanical garden with flourishing display areas and an active educational program. One of the ongoing themes demonstrated here is water conservation in a region of extreme temperatures and little precipitation. The Xeriscape Home Demonstration Garden features beautiful but drought-tolerant plantings, with savvy moisture-retention and weed-control techniques home gardeners will want to try. Other garden areas showcase ornamental grasses and perennials suited for high-altitude gardens.
Visiting tips: Sawtooth Botanical Garden is a fun day trip that can help you teach your children about gardening, ecology and the natural world. Sign up for the many youth programs offered at the Sunflower Children’s Center, including the “Sprout” series of nature classes, “summer garden camps, an annual bug festival, a junior master-gardeners program and “Discovery Corner,” a self-guided exhibit with children’s nature activities. Sawtooth’s yearly family harvest festival will be October 19, 2008. The garden is free to the public, although visitors are encouraged to make a donation to support the nonprofit organization’s ongoing efforts.

Contact: 11 Gimlet Road, Ketchum, Idaho 83340; 208-726-9358; www.sbgarden.org.

The Historic Gardens of Alcatraz
Visitors to Alcatraz, the popular San Francisco Bay–area national park also called “The Rock,” may come expecting to tour the island fortress that formerly housed a federal prison for notorious criminals. The history of Alcatraz is the stuff of legend: Before it was a federal penitentiary (1934–1963), the island was a Civil War fortress and military prison. But there is a softer side to Alcatraz, and it includes a long-forgotten rose garden once tended by inmates. After the prison was closed in the 1960s, the gardens on the island were abandoned. Nonetheless, nearly 200 species of shrubs, succulents, bulbs and perennials continued to survive in rocky soil with no fertilizers or supplemental water. In recent years, the “Historic Gardens of Alcatraz” project has begun restoration on garden areas, inspired by the work of early residents—prisoners, soldiers, wardens and their families—who lived, worked and gardened on the island for more than a century. Spearheaded by the Garden Conservancy in partnership with the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and its conservancy arm, the ongoing renovations enable documentation and preservation of Alcatraz’s horticultural history.

Visiting tips: You can reach Alcatraz via a short ferry ride from San Francisco’s Pier 33. Docent tours of the historic gardens are held.

Above: A former swimming pool, constructed in the 1920s, now forms the largest of Lotusland’s water gardens. Below: The Blue Garden at Lotusland features plants with silver and blue-gray foliage.
Lotusland

In 1941, Madame Ganna Walska, a well-known Polish opera singer and oft-married socialite, purchased an estate, featuring Spanish architecture, and its surrounding grounds in the Central California coastal community of Montecito, near Santa Barbara. She shed husband No. 6 and devoted her energies, during the next 43 years of her life, to designing an unconventional botanical garden with exotic planting schemes and collections of rare plants.

Called Lotusland, for the beautiful Indian lotuses that grow in the garden’s elegant pools and ponds, the property is considered a must-visit garden. Today, top landscape designers emulate Madame Walska’s avant-garde approach, incorporating bold plant forms, unusual color combinations and massed displays of favorite specimens. Thriving on 37 acres, and enclosed by walls of sun-washed pink stucco, the botanical wonderland opened to the public in 1993. Visitors are dazzled by the sheer majesty of the extraordinary plant collections—including rare cycads, cactuses, palms and euphorbia—growing together in one place (there are more than 2,900 different kinds of plants at Lotusland). Even if you don’t consider yourself a gardener, a visit to Lotusland is a fun day...
trip and a great way to learn about Madame Walska’s unique vision and legacy.

**Visiting tips:** You can visit Lotusland only by advance reservation (address and driving information are provided at that time). Docent-led tours are offered at 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., Wednesday through Saturday, mid-February to mid-November. Admission is $35 for adults; $10 for children ages 5–18; free for children under age 5. Last-minute visitors are encouraged to call for openings to join a scheduled tour. Family tours are available for groups with children under age 10.

Mailing address: 695 Ashley Road, Santa Barbara, California 93108; 805-969-9990; www.lotusland.org.

**The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens**

It’s easy to fill a day visiting the many collections of paintings, sculpture, historical documents and gardens at the magnificent 120-acre California estate of railroad and real estate developer Henry Edwards Huntington, near Pasadena, California. But you’ll want to save extra time to see the Huntington’s newest feature: Liu Fang Yuan, or the “Garden of Flowing Fragrance.” The new classical Chinese garden opened earlier this year in a 12-acre wooded area adjacent to the Huntington’s established, 9-acre Japanese Garden (which dates to 1912 and was installed by Huntington), featuring a Zen Garden and Bonsai Court.

Planners fostered international collaboration among scholars, architects and engineers to create this Chinese garden. Features include a 1.5-acre lake, a complex of pavilions, a teahouse and tea shop, and five stone bridges. In 2006 and 2007, stone artisans, wood carvers, roof-tile experts and other craftsmen traveled from China to help in the garden’s initial phases. Artfully pruned black pines; stands of golden and black bamboo; fragrant and flowering pear, plum and cherry trees; magnolias; azaleas; rhododendrons; willows; and Chinese elms are used as living sculptures throughout the serene destination.

**Visiting tips:** For an authentic experience, order Chinese tea and dim sum at Liu Fang Yuan’s traditional teahouse, called the Hall of the Jade Camellia, and enjoy a peaceful break overlooking the Lake of Reflected Fragrance. Allow time to see the many other spectacular gardens within the grounds of the Huntington. The Botanical Gardens are divided into more than a dozen thematic areas on 120 acres and include more than 15,000 different species of plants.

Contact: 1151 Oxford Road, San Marino, California 91108; 626-405-2100; www.huntington.org.

Visitors enjoy the sunshine at an outdoor cafe next to the Queens Botanical Garden’s new Visitor & Administration Center.
Queens Botanical Garden

You may have heard of New York’s older and larger public gardens, in Brooklyn (The Brooklyn Botanic Garden) and the Bronx (New York Botanical Garden), but there’s plenty thriving in Queens. The Queens Botanical Garden came into existence through “Gardens on Parade,” a horticultural feature of the 1939-40 World’s Fair. During the 1964 World’s Fair, the gardens were relocated to an adjacent 39-acre site, along with two blue Atlas cedar trees (Cedrus atlantica ‘Glauca’), which now stand sentry at the entrance. Not only is Queens Botanical Garden free to the public, it’s also home to several new sustainability projects, including a Visitor & Administration Center that is one of the greenest buildings in New York City. The structure—which features a green roof whose plants reduce stormwater runoff, and solar panels that produce 17 percent of its electricity—received LEED Platinum certification (the highest green-building rating) and is part of QBG’s Sustainable Landscapes and Buildings Project, which encompasses new native species and a water-recycling system.

Visiting tips: You can learn more about the ecological and environmental benefits of “green roofs” as you tour the 8,000-square-foot meadowlike roof covering a 147-seat public auditorium. The design provides insulation and reduces heating and cooling expenses for the building below. Visitors can walk across it to enjoy a flourishing collection of native woodland ferns, shrubs, sedges and wildflowers. The garden’s plants require minimal artificial watering and provide much-needed habitat for humans, birds and insects.

Contact: 43-50 Main St., Flushing, New York 11355; 718-886-3800; www.queensbotanical.org.

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Lessons to Take Home From Gardens

The creative work of top horticulturists, landscape architects and garden designers is on display in the beds and borders of green, glorious garden landscapes wherever you travel. As you stroll along the paths, take note of interesting plant combinations that you’d like to try re-creating at home. You’ll also discover trees, shrubs, perennials and ornamental grasses growing at their mature size and form in the landscape—something that’s hard to imagine when you’re scrutinizing a photo on the plastic tag at the local nursery. Public gardens are hands-on places that encourage visitors to smell flowers and touch leaves. Even after spending a few hours within their walls, you’ll leave feeling rejuvenated—and carrying a notebook full of great ideas for your own garden. Here are some tips to enhance your visit:

Plan ahead. It’s best to call or check online before you visit a garden. Verify admission information, seasonal programs and special exhibits that may require advance tickets. One fun feature on many Websites is the “What’s in Bloom” section, which discusses timing your visit with the blooming of different specimens or collections.

Visit during off-hours. Schedule your day-in-the-garden during less-crowded weekdays or early morning/late afternoon hours on weekends. A bonus for shutterbugs: The light during dawn and dusk is considered the best quality for plant and garden photography.

Dress for the elements. Enhance your experience by wearing comfortable shoes and a hat to protect you from sun or rain. As with any outdoor activity, it’s smart to have a waterproof jacket if there’s any possibility of precipitation. Take a lightweight backpack or a fanny pack large enough to hold a digital camera and a small notebook.

Borrow the best ideas. As you observe the sights, smells and sounds of a garden, ask yourself: “Which design elements please me most?” Think about the mood conveyed by each garden and its displays. What colors and combinations catch your eye? What design styles resonate with you and seem compatible with your home’s architecture? Document what you like best by taking photos, jotting down plant names or sketching the style of an arbor. You can emulate these ideas and re-create them at home, on a smaller scale. —D.P.