

LOS ANGELES COUNTY ARBORETUM AND BOTANICAL GARDEN: A HORTICULTURAL HOT SPOT IN THE CITY OF ANGELS



Our pace quickens as we enter the arboretum. Superintendent Tim Phillips knows it will be a busy day, entrance fees are waived the first Tuesday of each month and there's a film crew waiting to get started. As we walk onto the Bauer Lawn I'm taken with the grand view of the San Gabriel Mountains towering to the north framed by a lush hortocopia of trees from around the world. Tim casually mentions that this part of California can grow more

types of plants than almost anywhere in the world. The Mediterranean climate is nearly perfect. Rarely a freeze, sunny days and cool nights...with irrigation almost anything is possible. That's a pretty big deal for an arboretum and botanical garden.



Touring such a public garden with a senior staff member is a dream come true for any plant geek. But, this was the continuation of a long-term personal and professional relationship. I first met Tim in a tropical ecology class at the University of Hawaii in 1991. I was working in the Botany Department at Bishop Museum, the State Museum of Cultural and Natural History and Tim was the caretaker at the Universities Lyon Arboretum, a legendarily tropical garden. Tim's training was more horticulturally oriented, mine more botanical. Many hours ensued as we botanized the islands remarkable gardens and mountains over the next several years. Over the past few decades we have toured gardens in Colorado, Washington DC and London together.

With predictable enthusiasm and lively banter, we headed into the collections as Tim's radio crackled the occasional question or inquiry. Like kids in a botanical candy shop we headed straight for the Madagascar Spiny Forest, a relatively recent addition under Tim's decade-plus tenure at the arboretum. To the untrained eye it might look like a generic collection of desert plants. But this is far more interesting. Madagascar is one of the world's great endemic kingdoms. Nearly all the plants and animals found there are unique to the island. Only a few other locations in the world share such a highly unusual and endemic biota. As Islands go, only New Caledonia, Hawaii and the Canaries rival Madagascar. On a continent only the Cape Province of South Africa compares. Amazingly, many plants from these exotic locations can be grown with considerable success in the Los Angeles Basin.

A favorite of the Madagascar collection is Pachypodium, sometimes called the Madagascar Palm. It's swollen spiny trunk narrows to a whorl of relatively small leaves. One must wonder if Dr. Seuss saw these plants somewhere and included them in his many illustrations. Nearby a smaller version of Pachypodium called Elephants Foot looks as if it's ready burst.



Among several unique Aloes the tall narrow stick-like trunks of the Madagascar Ocotillo reach for the sun. It has a stunning similarity to the native Ocotillo but is totally unrelated belonging to an entire plant family found only in Madagascar. The tiny thick leaves radiate in perfect rows like miniature solar panels. In a gravelly bed nearby the Madagascan Rosy Periwinkle blooms with characteristic brilliance. A common landscape plant throughout North America, it's also the source of Vincristine and

Vinblastine two of the most effective drugs for fighting childhood leukemia among other cancers.

As Tim heads off to meet the film crew I wonder over to the Prehistoric Forest. The thought of tree ferns and ancient conifers growing among the world's dinosaurs has always fascinated me. So many museum dioramas I saw as child strived to recreate these ancestral forests in skillfully painted mural behind a brooding Stegosaurus. I'm thrilled to find several species of tree ferns mingled with Norfolk Island pines and

cycads. With lake Baldwin in the background, you can easily imagine the Stegosaurus lumbering through.

Apparently, the production crew for Katy Perry's "Roar" video agreed. The entire shoot took place at the Arboretum. The diverse casts included a friendly elephant. Many beloved movies and television shows have used the Arboretum over the years. In fact, this may be the only public garden in the nation that employs a full-time person to manage all the filming request.



On the south side of Lake Baldwin some of the Arboretum's extensive human history comes into focus. The beautiful Queen Ann Cottage is a window into Southern California's Golden age, an example of Victorian architecture at its best. It was built by Elias Jackson "Lucky" Baldwin in 1885 as part of his 2000-acre ranch. Nearby is the equally interesting Coach Barn complete with a beautiful collection of horse drawn carriages. Many species

of stately palms surround the lake along with a Redwood Grove. One can only imagine the privilege of living in such an exquisite setting with one of the world's most accommodating climates. The cottage is on the National Register of Historic Place.

Only a short walk away one comes upon the Meyburg Waterfall. In full stride Tim arrives eager to show me the Ficus collection. We ascend an artfully designed stairway that negotiates the waterfall without ever having to balance on a slippery rock. Numerous blooming orchids line the route as falls roar in the background. One of the resident peacocks preens near the top of the falls as we arrive on Tallac Knoll, a slightly wilder part of the arboretum. Trees make up much of attraction on the Knoll, none more than the large Ficus with draping crowns, the trunks festooned in maturing fruits. Nearby a grove of native Engelmann Oak inhabits a semi-arid slope. Trees of various ages are closely monitored for vigor and regeneration. Englemann Oak was the one of the prominent native trees in precolonial times.

Finishing our tour, we glanced at the large Australian collection and stopped by the beautiful fern exhibit. I had a plane to catch and Tim's radio sparked up with another request. We said goodbye as Tim dashed off, while I was planning my next visit. An Arboretum and Botanical Garden of this caliber deserves many returns.

From the BGT Team-more info at www.arboretum.org