

Mendocino Coast Botanical Garden



The Mendocino Botanic Garden is set on bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

The Garden was founded in 1961 by retired nurseryman Ernest Schoerfer and his wife Betty when they purchased five parcels of land south of Fort Bragg, California. The mild coastal conditions, consistent water supply, and quality soil were perfect for tender rhododendrons and other acid-loving plants. As the proprietor of the largest retail nursery in the San Fernando Valley, the Burbank Horticultural Service, from 1930 to 1960, he had designed and landscaped gardens throughout California. In order to create a place of beauty for the world to enjoy, he began to clear dead trees and debris, built easy walking trails and roads, and installed water systems. Benches, picnic tables, a cliff house for watching whales and a gift shop were constructed, and plantings installed. They opened it to the public in 1966, gradually developing the grounds. It was purchased by the State of California in the early 90s and is now part of the Mendocino Coast Recreation and Park District.

Set on windswept bluffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean, the Mendocino Coast Botanical Garden a little bit of something for everyone. Over 60,000 visitors annually enjoy the many different plant collections as well as extensive natural areas and gorgeous views. This is the only public garden in the continental United States fronting directly on the ocean, and the maritime climate makes it a garden for all seasons. The Garden is known for its collection of tender species rhododendrons, some of which grow nearly 20 feet tall. Native to the cloud forests of Southeastern Asia and the Himalayas, they thrive in the foggy coastal climate here along the northern California coast. The Fort Bragg Collection includes many rhododendrons hybridized in the area, including 'Noyo Chief', the official flower of Ft. Bragg. Other rhodies are spread throughout the gardens, with the tall mature ones towering over the walkways in huge swaths. They bloom in a dazzling array of reds, pinks, purples and whites from March through June. There are also some deciduous Exbury azaleas.



The grounds of the Mendocino Botanic Garden have been gradually developed over 45 years.

Even the entry to the Garden is special. The parking area extends around a large pond filled with water lilies, and plantings on a central island. The door in the main entrance is an art work composed of a variety of significant woods (cedar of Lebanon, black walnut, redwood, and others) grown in California and glass and bronze inserts by different artists.



The highway entrance (L); pond filled with waterlilies and blooming *Dierama* (pink flowers) on the central island (LC); the main entrance to the Garden (RC) and the ornate door to the reception building (R).

From the entrance area, where inviting chairs and tables surrounded by container plantings grace the patio area, descend the steps to the perennial garden.



From the flat entry patio filled with containers (L), wide stairs descend (C) to the perennial garden (R).

The undulating beds flow around the wide grass spaces, and are filled with bulbs, flowering herbaceous plants and grasses. Many of these are from Mediterranean climates, but others are familiar to Midwest-



Orange-flowered *Kniphofia* bloom in front of a smoke bush, *Cotinus coggygria* (L), while a multitude of flowers fill other beds (LC); red-leaved bananas are placed among the perennials for extra impact (RC); tall old trees tower over a planting of airy, purple-flowered *Verbena bonariensis*.

ern gardeners. Fuchsias, hydrangeas, and dahlias are the highlights in fall. Carefully placed, non-hardy tropicals, such as bananas with their huge red leaves, add drama, along with a number of sculptures.

The cactus and succulent garden has a wide variety of species that are adapted the coastal climate, especially those native to Chile and the west coast of Southern Africa where they experience similar foggy conditions. They are in flower primarily in May through July. The Mediterranean Climate Garden contains plants from regions that have winter rainfall and warm dry summers: around the Mediterranean Sea, California, Western Cape South Africa, Chile and Western Australia. These plants have adaptations to drought, including fuzzy or silvery leaves, thickened leaves, and leaves with a vertical orientation that limit the surface exposed to the midday sun. Some species have evolved as annuals, avoiding periods of drought as dormant seed, while others have adapted to surviving fire. These are ideal candidates for drought tolerant landscaping. Spring is the best time to appreciate the large collection of over 200 bulbs from Mediterranean climates, including Mediterranean species tulips, native Californian alliums, South African babianas and lachenalias, Chilean herbertias and many others are grown in pots or planted in the ground (but still within pots to protect them from marauding gophers).



The cactus and succulent collection (L); large-flowered Matilija poppy, *Romneya coulteri* (C); and some of the plants from Mediterranean climates (R).

The camellia collection is best appreciated in the winter through early spring, when the delicate flowers open, while wild mushrooms pop up from November to January. The heaths and heathers collection is stunning when in bloom in late summer, looking like miniature rolling hills of purple and lavender.



The colorful heath and heather collection.

A large group of heritage varieties grace the manicured Mendocino Heritage Rose Collection. Nearby is the Mae E. Lauer Display House filled with fuchsias and begonias from late spring to early fall.



The heritage rose collection (L and C); potted begonias inside the Mae E. Lauer Display house.

The neat vegetable garden and fruit orchard uses primarily organic techniques for pest control, including floating row cover seen in the photo.



The vegetable garden and nearby areas.

Nearby is the dahlia garden, which comes into bloom in mid- to late summer. the dahlias are showstoppers, with flowers ranging from the size of a button to a bowling ball, in a kaleidoscope of colors. At the back of the dahlia garden is a gazebo built of the same sorts of twigs and branches as the deer gate (below).



The dahlia garden at the beginning of bloom.

Leave the main area through the beautiful gate made of twigs and branches to keep the deer out. The remainder of the 47 acre garden remains in its natural state, with a number (six) of rare and endangered plants on the property. The easy half mile trail to the ocean leaves the carefully tended areas behind, to traverse a lush, fern-filled canyon and dense coastal pine forest – where you may see deer – to the coastal prairie filled with wildflowers, including the rare Mendocino paintbrush.



The ornate, yet rustic, deer gate (L); the trail to the ocean (LC); along the Fern Canyon trail (RC); native giant horsetail, *Equisetum telmateia* spp. *braunii* (R).

The seaside Cliff House provides shelter to look at the crashing waves below. Gray whales can often be spotted, especially during their winter and spring migrations. Native plants abound along the rocky cliffs.



Ferns in Fern Canyon (L); a mule deer (LC); the Pacific Ocean can be glimpsed along some of the trails (RC); native flowers growing on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean (R).

The Garden is also home to over 150 species birds (some only seasonal) and other animals. Hummingbirds buzz among the flowers and squirrels chatter up in the trees. Black oystercatchers and ospreys frequent the rocky coastline year-round, while red-throated loons and double-crested cormorants are common in summer. Some of the more uncommon birds that can be seen at the Garden include ash-throated flycatcher, savannah sparrow and red-breasted nuthatch.



Osprey with fish (L); white-crowned sparrow (LC); female rufus hummingbird (RC); black oystercatcher (R).

The gift shop offers a selection of books and garden-related gifts, while the nursery has rhododendrons and native plants, fuchsias and other blooming plants for sale. Sandwiches and handmade ice cream are available at Cowlick's in the Garden.



The gift shop in the entry building (L); the nursery sales area (C) and the snack shop (R) are both near the entrance.

Master Gardener Volunteers answer local gardener’s questions at the Garden on a regular schedule, with a small office in the Library near the entrance to the Garden.



Signs (L) direct people to the Library (C), where Master Gardener Volunteers are available to answer questions, using the extensive collection of resource materials (R).

Plan on spending at least an hour to see the highlights, but schedule more time if you want to linger and really appreciate the plants and location. Umbrellas are available for rainy days, and dogs on leashes are welcome. The Gardens also encourages visitors to bring their own food. The fruit orchard and vegetable garden is one of the most popular spots for picnicking. The main trails through the gardens are wheelchair accessible.



A bench is set among blooming hydrangeas.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

Getting There

Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens is located at 18220 N. Hwy. 1, Fort Bragg, CA. It is open daily except on the Saturday following Labor Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Hours vary through the seasons, so call (707) 964-4352 or check the website.

Many area B&Bs and hotels offer discounted tickets. The Garden is a participant in the AHS reciprocal admissions program, so visitors can get free entry by showing their membership card if they belong to another participating botanical garden.

Additional Information:

🟩 Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens – official website at www.gardenbythesea.org