

## San Antonio Botanical Garden



Colorful croton and other plants grown in the shade of a tree at the San Antonio Botanical Gardens.

and Recreation Department, the San Antonio Botanical Garden encompasses 38 acres in the center of the city in a residential area near Fort Sam Houston at the upper east end of Mahncke Park. Today the garden consists of many formal and display gardens, an overlook tower, a conservatory, a historic brick entrance building, and 11 acres of native plants.

Deep in the heart of Texas, the San Antonio Botanical Garden is a botanical gem with the mission “to inspire people to connect with the plant world and understand the importance of plants in our lives.” Conceived in the 1940’s, it was first organized as the San Antonio Garden Center while a master plan for a public botanical garden was developed and presented in the late 1960’s. The Garden became a reality in 1980, after several years of construction on land formerly used as a waterworks site. Since then several major capital improvements have been made to the Botanical Garden.

Operated under the auspices of the City of San Antonio Parks



A flower-lined path in the Garden.

The **Sullivan Carriage House**, designed by noted architect Alfred Giles for banker Daniel J. Sullivan was constructed in 1896 in downtown San Antonio. In 1988 it was relocated, piece by piece, to the



The entrance sign (L), colorful blooming shrubs in the parking lot (C), and the walkway to the Sullivan Carriage House (R).

Botanical Garden where it was fully restored and dedicated in 1995. This building now serves as the main entrance to the gardens and its former stables and carriage house contain a restaurant, gift shop, offices, and event and meeting spaces.

**Gertie’s Garden**, honoring Ethel Gertrude Smyth White, is on the left as you enter the grounds. This area is a showcase for container gardening. The



The main entrance path (L) and purple martin house (R).

declining ornamental pear trees that used to shade this area were replaced with Texas ash. Purple martins reside in the bird house high above the plants.

The **Rose Garden**, seasonally filled with brilliant blooms of pink, yellow, red and white, offers a chance to savor sweet fragrances and learn about cultivars adapted to the climate.



The Rose Garden in midsummer.

Near the Rose Garden, the **Sacred Garden** is a small area that has plants that have been mentioned in sacred texts (Bible, Koran and other religious writings). Many of the plants here have been used by people for thousands of years, including papyrus, date palms, pomegranates, and olive trees.



The entrance to the Sacred Garden (L), with potted caladiums in front of papyrus (C), and shady arbor (R).

The showy **formal beds** are comprised of four large rectangular display areas which are changed seasonally to display a variety of fun colors and textures – an example of living art. Across the way, the **Old Fashioned Garden** displays many traditional varieties of annuals and perennials mixed among modern versions. With so many flowers it is a great spot to watch pollinators such as hummingbirds, butterflies and bees.



Plantings in the Formal Beds (L) change seasonally and flowers there attract pollinators such as hummingbirds (R).

The **Wisteria Arbor** is a large steel structure covered with wisteria vines that provide a shady refuge during the hotter months. The **Shade Garden** to the right (west) of Wisteria Arbor offers ideas of plant that grow well in the shade of oaks or other trees.



The Wisteria Arbor from a distance (L), the Wisteria Arbor (LC), tall tree (RC) and caladiums in shade garden (R).

Beyond that is the **Fountain Plaza** with cool pools of water coming from the fountain hand-carved from *cantera* (a Mexican volcanic rock) and designed to look like the fountain in the Generalife at the Alhambra, a 16th century Moorish palace and fortress in Grenada, Spain.



The Fountain Plaza (L, with container plantings around the water (C), and the hand-carved fountain (R).

Engage your senses in the **Sensory Garden** (originally called the Garden for the Blind), where visitors are encouraged to touch and smell the plants and listen carefully to the orchestra of natural sounds. Designed as “garden therapy,” this was the first part of the garden opened to the public and features plants that are fragrant or distinctive to the touch, such as lamb’s ear.



The Sensory Garden includes raised beds (L), colorful beds (C) and statuary - this one of an armadillo (R).

**Kumamoto En**, a gift from San Antonio’s Sister City of Kumamoto, Japan, is a Japanese garden reflecting styles and techniques from Kumamoto’s 300-year-old Suizenji Garden and from Katsura Detached Palace garden in Kyoto. The roughly 85 feet by 85 feet space surrounded by a woven fence (which was closed for renovations when I was there) contains several finely crafted structures and many symbolic features.



Looking over the fence into Kumamoto En.

The **Lucile Halsell Conservatory** was designed by award winning Argentinian architect Emilio Ambasz and completed in 1988. It consists of a series of five separate, climate controlled pyramidal greenhouses surrounding a sunken central courtyard and tropical lagoon filled with aquatic plants.



The entrance to the Conservatory (L); the courtyard before the Exhibition Room (C); looking across the courtyard pond toward the Palm and Cycad Pavilion (R).

Each of the individual glass buildings tucked into the earth houses plants from desert regions to equatorial rainforests. Specialty collections include alpine plants, cacti and succulents, carnivorous plants, epiphytes, ferns and aroids, tropical fruits, and palms and cycads. The Exhibit Room has high humidity, heat and shade for the tropical plants, including bromeliads and orchids, showcased there. The Northrup Tropical Room has plants from the equatorial jungles, and the 65-foot tall Palm and Cycad Pavilion contains one of the top public collections of palms and new world cycads in the country.



The iconic Palm and Cycad Pavilion (L); orchids and others in the Exhibition Room (C) and in the palm house (R).

The Desert Pavilion or “cactus room” does include many beautiful cactus species, but there are many other types of succulents from the deserts of the world. The space is organized geographically, with the plants native to the New World – primarily agaves and cacti – on the left side of the room and Old World species, primarily from Africa and including many euphorbias, are on the right side. Rustic sculptures of desert animals add a whimsical touch.



Inside the Kleberg Desert Pavilion, with scorpion (LC) and horny toad (R) sculptures.

The Fern Grotto is the most humid room in the Conservatory, kept at 80% humidity year round to recreate the moist, shady habitats in which ferns thrive. A variety of ferns, orchids, and other climbing plants occupy all areas of this room, even the cracks and ledges in the cliff-like walls.



The Fern Grotto entrance (L) leads to a humid interior with waterfall (LC and RC) and tropical plants (R).

**Watersaver Lane** is a resource for local homeowners looking for water efficient gardening ideas. This one-third acre “model yard” display located near the Conservatory offers practical techniques and the basic principles of xeriscaping. In addition to examples of attractive plants adapted to the Texas climate, there is also information on drip irrigation, permeable paving materials, mulches, and turf bubbling watering systems for water conservation.



Model yards on Watersaver Lane showing plants and techniques for low water use.

Hike up the **Overlook**, the second highest spot in San Antonio, for beautiful views of the city skyline and garden plantings. In the 1880’s this location was chosen to be a water reservoir for the city. The area that is now the Amphitheater (see below) was excavated for part of the reservoir, with the removed earth mounded up to create the hill on which the overlook sits. The acequia or small aqueduct flows downhill from there to the East Texas Lake. This is a recreation of the historic Spanish water system lined with native limestone that once channeled water from the river to the farmland around the missions.



The hill in the middle of the garden (L), with the tower (C), that provides views of the garden (R).



The Overlook offers view of the city and garden (L and C). Water in the limestone acequia flows down the hill (R).

The grassy, sunken **Amphitheater** is used for special events, including weddings, Shakespeare in the Park held each June, and the summer evening Concert Under the Stars series. The walls at the back are made of limestone blocks, and the stone columns and wooden beams above are covered with wisteria (which is obviously much more showy in spring!).



The Amphitheater.

Continue along the walkway to the **Cactus and Succulent Garden** where native arid-area plants are displayed in a naturalistic setting.



The Cactus and Succulent garden features these distinctive plants in naturalistic settings.

The **Texas Native Trail** showcases plant communities representative of different parts of Texas. Three distinctive and diverse ecological regions – the Hill Country (Edwards Plateau), East Texas Pineywoods, and South Texas – vary in soil, plant life, topography, and weather. The plantings on three loop trails are enhanced by interpretive signage and several authentic early Texas cabins which were moved from different parts of Texas to reinforce the regional theme. On the **Hill Country Trail** two historical buildings are set amid the meadows filled with native wildflowers, prairie grasses, oaks and junipers



Entrance to the Hill Country Trail (L); the Auld House from across the meadow (C) and prairie flowers (R).

adapted to the rocky, alkaline soils, while a limestone spring bubbles nearby. The Schumacher House was built by German immigrants in 1849 using a wooden lattice work to brace native limestone walls. The Auld House was built by a pioneer family in the 1800's using pinyon pine and limestone to chink the gaps between the logs.

The **East Texas Pineywoods Trail** goes around the one-acre East Texas Lake surrounded by sycamore and bald cypress trees and acid-loving woodland species such as magnolia, sweetgum, and sassafras. 6,000 cubic yards of sandy, acidic soil was brought in from east Texas and regular watering is necessary to maintain the moist, humid conditions that east Texas plants need to survive. The lake was part of the



The East Texas Trail (L) loops around the lake (C) surrounded by trees including bald cypress with their distinctive “knees” sticking out of the water (R).

former reservoir that was abandoned in 1890. Look for wildlife here: turtles sunning on logs sticking out of the water, waterfowl such as ducks and herons in the lake, squirrels in the trees and great-tailed grackles foraging on the ground. Loblolly and longleaf pines grow near the log cabin.



The log cabin on the East Texas Trail is set among pine trees (L). Look for wildlife around the water, including turtles sunning on a log (top C), great-tailed grackles (bottom C), and squirrels in the trees (R).

The **South Texas Trail** takes you through “thornscrub” with dryland trees and shrubs such as mesquite, huisache, cenizo, ebony, and sotol that are adapted to limited rainfall and other south Texas natives such as yucca, agave, cholla, and prickly pear cactus. It loops around to go past the palisado-adobe house (built with materials salvaged from an old home in south San Antonio).



The South Texas Trail (L) leads past cactus and agaves (C) to the small adobe house (R).

In addition to the permanent gardens and displays, there are special, short-term exhibits at times. In 2013 the exhibit “Savage Gardens: The Real and Imaginary World of Carnivorous Plants” had four oversized, multi-media sculptures as the core of the exhibit to show an up-close plant encounter from an insect’s perspective for a venus flytrap (*Dionaea*), pitcher plant (*Nepenthes*), trumpet plant (*Sarracenia*) and sundew (*Drosera*).

Of course the gardens are really spectacular in the spring, but they are worth visiting in any season – even during the heat of summer or cold of winter – with something always in bloom.



The sundew (L) and trumpet plants (R) that were part of the special exhibit “Savage Gardens” in 2013.

– Susan Mahr, University of Wisconsin - Madison

### Additional Information:

- 🟩 San Antonio Botanical Garden – official website at [www.sabot.org/](http://www.sabot.org/)
- 🟩 San Antonio Water System Audio Tour – a cell phone audio program coordinated with specific markers in the San Antonio Botanical Garden at [myoncell.mobi/stops.php?acct\\_num=12103902995&page=all](http://myoncell.mobi/stops.php?acct_num=12103902995&page=all)