

SPRING/SUMMER 2024

# Descanso

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**Our Mission**

**At Descanso Gardens, we connect people with nature and one another.**

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# The tulips are planted



Every January at Descanso, Enchanted Forest of Light ends and an army of volunteers and staff descend on the Promenade to plant 30,000 tulips. For a few months, The Promenade looks like a field of dirt but then the tulips start popping up, eventually turning into a kaleidoscope of spring color to delight visitors. All the work of planting and tending is worth it — nature gives us a beautiful show.

I think 2024 will have the same feeling as planting the tulips. We have planted so many bulbs (or, in this case, seeds) months — in some cases years — ago, and now we will see them grow into dazzling blooms.

**Come take a ride**

I am so excited about our new train station. The train is one of the most popular things in the garden. I always knew that we had to think bigger, but it wasn't until we found Applied Imagination that I knew we could make it a reality. Applied Imagination is a company that uses botanical materials to create wonderful, whimsical model railroads. (You can read more about them in this magazine.) You will see Nature's Table turned into a new train station in early July.

**You'll never want to leave**

Another exciting seed planted long ago was plans for a restaurant here in the garden. Later this year, we will begin construction on Farmhouse at Descanso Gardens. Under the direction of Chef Richard Mead — known for Farmhouse at Roger's Gardens — we hope the restaurant will become a destination for nights out, garden lunches, and special occasions.

There are so many more things coming for Descanso in 2024. I cannot wait to share them with you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juls". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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**On the cover:** Apricot mallow (*Sphaeralcea ambigua*)

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Native berries are easy beauties that you can grow in your own yard.

# Meet the natives of SoCal

From the deserts to woodlands, Descanso staff is finding inspiration from the plants that call SoCal home.

*The California buckeye has sweet-scented flowers and distinctive chestnut-shaped seed pods.*



# California (Native) Dreaming

by Austin Krueger  
*California Garden Horticulturist*

The evolution of a natural environment is a wonder to behold. The time of year can be told from the changing of leaves or opening of flowers; the passage of time can be shown through the progression of a forest, and a fallen tree exposes its rings to display its actual age. Watching grass grow may be a phrase used to signify that an activity or situation is tedious or dull, but watching the continued growth of a landscape or environment couldn't be further from boring. There is always enjoyment and knowledge to be gained at Descanso Gardens, and these are inspiring times for visitors to witness our landscape's evolution.

Descanso Gardens is dedicated to the preservation and exhibition of native plants, and there are projects, both

future and ongoing, dedicated to displaying the biological abundance found within the state of California. Millions of years of evolution have created a bounty of diverse California plant life.

## **A showcase of the state's ecosystems**

There are at least 6,500 species of plants that are native to California. Approximately 222 unique California native plants are designated as rare, threatened, or endangered; over 2,000 more plants are considered to be of concern. In a sea of urbanization, it is the garden's duty as stewards of this landscape to preserve and augment populations of native plants so that our environment can be enjoyed by visitors and wildlife alike. The purpose of Descanso's California Garden is to showcase plants and environments across the state's

unique ecoregions. In contrast, the Oak Woodland is designed to give visitors a glimpse of what the Northern LA Basin's chaparral ecosystem looks like when mainly left untouched. The undertakings in these areas will provide visitors with familiarity and new experiences.

One such development is planting a wildflower field in the California Garden. Nestled between the lake and Matilija poppies was a field primarily overtaken by invasive and non-native species. With a gentle slope, paths facilitating a nearly 360-degree viewing of the field, and a background of the San Gabriel Mountains, it is an area that beckons for a burst of color. Aside from its visual appeal, this feature aims to plant native flora to encourage abundant native fauna. Relying primarily upon plants propagated in-house through the boundless skill of our Nursery Horticulturist, Frank Obregon, this field has been planted with a diverse array of perennial and annual flowering plants native to Southern California.

Our new wildflower field will continue to be seeded throughout the cool season, and we invite you to observe this

**There is always enjoyment and knowledge to be gained at Descanso Gardens, and these are inspiring times for visitors to witness our landscape's evolution.**

*The California Garden will evolve into a true showcase of the region's plant diversity.*



new feature unfold and thrive this year — and many years — to come.

### **Rethinking our approach to natives**

Additionally, plans are in motion to rejuvenate the Desert Garden within the California Garden. In a way, the Desert Garden is the gateway to the native's area. If you're a Los Angeles transplant like me, the high desert ecosystems bordering Arizona and Nevada might also have been your gateway into the state. Given the prominence of this crossroads within the garden — and its significance to the state as a whole — we feel as though this desert subdivision of the native's

garden could better exhibit the native, water-tolerant plants found across the state to provide a more accurate interpretation of California's desert environments.

Diana Nightingale, Descanso's Camelia Horticulturist, wears many hats at the gardens. She is supremely talented and has a passion and skill for designing landscapes with native plants. Her expertise was put to great use in the configuration and planting of the Oak Woodland's newest feature, the Rainwater Garden.

Utilizing runoff that flows from the new nursery, the Rainwater Garden maximizes the use of natural precipitation to irrigate these plants. Diana

has chosen a plant palette that is highly attractive to a wide variety of native pollinators, and her construction of this basin displays a partnership of functional and aesthetic landscape design.

### **A commitment to the future**

Additionally, the Oak Woodland area will have several new features in the upcoming months and years. Thanks to a local Eagle Scout candidate's project, the landscape bordering the Rainwater Garden will be planted with native milkweeds to encourage the monarch butterfly established migratory patterns.

With all these recent and upcoming developments to the California Garden and Oak Woodland area, even the most frequent visitors have new landscapes to view, flowers to smell, and experiences to be had. Plants and gardens, just like people, take time to grow and establish. We invite you to witness these new features flourish, and we thank you for your continued support of Descanso Gardens.

# A truly Californian desert garden

by Frank Obregon  
Nursery Horticulturist

The deserts of Southern California are underappreciated and oft-forgotten keystones of California's world-renowned biodiversity and ecological richness. The Mojave Desert and Sonoran-Colorado Desert cover nearly 40,000 square miles combined — roughly a quarter of all the land in California. These deserts are surrounded and transversed by more than

90 mountain ranges, each of which includes innumerable combinations of habitat types in which life proliferates and diversifies among harsh dunes, expansive flatlands, secluded canyons, rich oases, and ephemeral lakes.

## The surprising diverse desert

Beyond the iconic Joshua trees, roadrunners, and tumbleweeds, the Mojave and Sonoran deserts support an astonishing

3,200 species of native plants, accounting for over 15 percent of all plant species found in the continental United States and nearly half of the plant species found in California. This diversity of plant life, in turn, supports more than 400 species of vertebrate animals, many thousands of insect species, and a suite of life wholly unique to the vast deserts of the Golden State.

At Descanso Gardens, most visitors begin touring the



## It is our hope and plan that the Desert Garden will become LA's "window to the local deserts" — showcasing small, high-quality highlights of these extraordinary and iconic Southern California ecosystems.

California Garden by passing through our Desert Garden — Descanso's botanical homage to the desert splendor to our east. This prime position makes the Desert Garden the "front door" to our native plant garden, and it has made the desert section one of our most popular and well-recognized native beds.

### **Change with purpose**

Unfortunately, most of the large plants in the Desert Garden were planted long ago and are weedy, non-native species with no natural connections to California! The large blue Agaves, extra-large prickly pear cacti, palo verde trees, and others are native to Texas, Mexico, and other geographical areas outside California's unique floristic province. While many of these plants are beautiful in their own right, they did not co-evolve with the plethora of other species that call California's deserts home. Because of this, such non-

native plants cannot support native animals as effectively as the native species, leading to a less diverse and less healthy ecosystem around the non-native species. These non-native plants also take vital water, nutrients, and space away from native species. Non-native plants are non-starters for a world-class botanic collection focused on highlighting the magic and beauty of California's desert plants. They will be replaced with more ecologically appropriate species.

### **A new look, the next chapter**

Beginning in late 2023 and into early 2024, the horticulture team will completely revitalize and reimagine what our Desert Garden experience will offer guests. The final result will be spectacular, showcasing a theme of Southern California's desert National Parks writ small. Through extensive hours of first-hand field botanizing, our team has developed a sense of what the desert ecosystems of Joshua Tree National Park, Death Valley National Park, and the eastern

San Gabriel National Monument ought to look like, and we will be authentically recreating such environments on-site in the Desert Garden. It is our hope and plan that the Desert Garden will become LA's "window to the local deserts" — showcasing small, high-quality highlights of these extraordinary and iconic Southern California ecosystems. Visitors can expect to stroll through stands of Joshua trees, explore a miniature saguaro "forest," walk beside dunes, and experience all the classic constituent plants that make Southern California's deserts unique and enchanting. Descanso's new Desert Garden will feature plant species not found in any other public garden in Los Angeles and will support many rare species needing conservation assistance. We are excited about this new chapter in the California Garden, and we hope you are too.

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*The Desert Garden will be replanted with California's desert natives.*

# Natives are for the birds (and bees)

*Diana Nightingale*  
*Camellia Horticulturist*

When planning a new garden, we are mesmerized by a vision of what it will become, but perhaps we should be just as interested in what we discover. The new gardens that are planned and taking shape in our California Garden will bring a more extraordinary richness to the garden's plant palette. We hope it will also provide greater habitat for the many animals that call this landscape home.

Our local insect fauna is a lot more diverse than one might expect. For the last eight months, I have sought to learn as much as I could about them. That journey has been life-changing, as knowing more about the invertebrates around us reveals a much more colorful and insightful view of what takes place in a landscape as we design, change, and steward it.

## **Take a closer look**

I encourage you to also stop for a moment, and you will be amazed by the small dramas that unfold. Each flicker in the corner of your eye, each buzz, each rustle has a story behind it.

Imagine on a warm, early summer morning, you are met with a field of wildflowers overlooking the lake. It is filled with blooming penstemons, brittlebush, native thistles, sages, milkweed, chamise, yarrow, lupines, and so much more. A soft buzz catches your attention as you walk one of the paths, and you follow it to the star-like flowers of native purple nightshade (*Solanum xanti*). A queen bumble bee is zooming from one flower to another, grasping it with her feet and swinging upside down as she gathers the pollen and moves it to her back legs. As she reaches her holding capacity, she suddenly zips away from the site to an abandoned burrow inside which she is building her nest, one waxy nest cell at a time.

Nearby, a metallic green sweat bee lands on the flower of a brittlebush and shuffling pollen toward her back legs. Meanwhile, a leafcutter bee swings close by to do the same, collecting her stock of pollen under her abdomen. They each fly in opposite directions. The green sweat bee returns to her nest that she dug into the warm, open soil between the flowering shrubs. The leafcutter bee returns to a small tunnel in wood created by a beetle just last year that she has since lined with small pieces of leaves.

## **It's the little things**

Nearby, a female flower fly (*Toxomerus marginatus*) hovers above a yarrow flower for a moment, its wings whirring so quickly you can feel light air currents as you move close. She

**The new gardens that are planned and taking shape in our California Garden will bring a more extraordinary richness to the garden's plant palette. We hope it will also provide greater habitat for the many animals that call this landscape home.**

*Stop and take a closer look. You may spot an American bumblebee.*



# Knowing more about the invertebrates around us reveals a much more colorful and insightful view of what takes place in a landscape as we design, change, and steward it.

lands and takes a sip of nectar, moving her glossy, geometrically patterned abdomen up and down as it reflects the sunlight back at you. She will lay an egg on a nearby flower, hatching into a small green larva that feeds on a local colony of sap-sucking aphids.

### The butterflies and bumble bees

Perched elegantly on the stem of a sage, buzzing with the activity of bees and butterflies, is a very fuzzy, yellow, and black fly. It is commonly known as a bumblebee robberfly (*Mallophora faultrix*) as it mimics the colors of its namesake to protect it against predators. Its large, compound eyes allow it to watch for honey bees and wasps, which it will catch in midair with its robust legs.

Meanwhile, a tiny marine blue butterfly flutters a seemingly unnecessary amount from one flower to another, taking sips of nectar between depositing a single egg at a time on the leaves of a chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*). Just nearby, a puddle remains from a

late-season storm around which other butterflies and honey bees congregate, sipping up both water and salts.

A mud dauber wasp gracefully floats into the scene to collect a ball of mud in her mandibles for the nest she is constructing in the sheltered corner of a nearby rockery. Just like a potter, she skillfully molds one layer at a time, creating a narrow tube connected to the rock. After a dizzyingly high number of trips, she has nearly completed the first of the many nest tubes she will construct in the coming days, each of which she will stock with prey alongside a single egg before sealing the tube with a mud cap.

Nearby, a tiny spider hides under a downy sunflower (*Helianthus sp.*) leaf rustling in the wind, hoping not to be the wasp's next victim. She has an unusual form with a long, thin, and silvery-green abdomen and long legs, the longest being the first pair stretched out in front of her. Known as a long-jawed orb weaver (*Tetragnatha sp.*), you may not notice that she is actually guarding a small egg

sac attached to the vegetation nearby.

An orange sulphur butterfly flits to one of the sunflowers above the spider for a sip of nectar before she flies to a flowering deerweed (*Acmispon glaber*) close by to lay an egg. Her underwings match the gold shade of the flower's petals, and she blends in perfectly the moment she lands.

### The busy lives of insects

Below this flowery canopy, a small, speckled gray and tan praying mantis streaks across the dry, crumbly soil. It has its eyes on a meal. Known as minor praying mantids, instead of lying in wait and ambushing their prey like their larger cousins, these little mantids run after them, grasping them in their front legs.

Out from under a nearby coyote brush dashes what looks like a large, red, fuzzy ant. A double-take confirms this strange apparition. Known as a velvet ant (*Dasymutilla sp.*), this striking creature is actually a wasp that packs a powerful sting. Super focused and barely flinching at our presence, she runs hither and thither, analyzing each nook and cranny of the complicated soil topography for her prey.

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*A marine blue butterfly visits the garden.*

### Stop and listen

Just above this scene, a monarch caterpillar holds onto the underside of a leaf of the narrowleaf milkweed (*Asclepias fascicularis*). Rather large at this point, it causes the leaf to hang more vertically than the others. The pink and white inflorescences above attract a host of pollinators and a few wasps the caterpillar hopes it can avoid. Meanwhile, a petite black and red milkweed bug quickly maneuvers itself to the underside of another milkweed leaf to prevent the presence of

the human looking closely at it, peaking around the margin to see if it is safe to emerge.

Suddenly, a trilling song emerges to pierce the air. It is coming from the trees around the lake below. An adult male cicada (*Platypedia sp.*), having recently emerged from its underground burrow where it had dug down a few summers ago, climbed up high into the canopy to call for a mate. Nearby, female cicadas, so well camouflaged that they are rarely seen, are cutting tiny slits into the trees' twigs to lay their

eggs. The young cicada nymphs that emerge will make the same journey as their parents down the tree to the soil where they will bury and feed on the nutritious sap of the roots until they, too, are ready to reemerge in a few years to a changed landscape.

These remarkable life stories are what make our gardens so much more prosperous, and as you watch the new gardens taking shape, keep your eyes peeled and your curiosity heightened to discover many, many more. 🌈



## VOLUNTEERS

# Volunteers: They make the garden grow

Much of Descanso Gardens' beauty and charm is thanks to its hardworking volunteers. More than 200 strong, they tend our gardens, but they are also the smiling faces that greet our guests, educate our visiting students, and support our staff. But even more than that, they are our biggest supporters and cheerleaders.

"They are dedicated members of Descanso Gardens, our local community, and help forward our mission of connecting people to nature and each other," said Chanel Jimenez, Education Programs Coordinator, Volunteer Programs. "It is my absolute pleasure to work for such an amazing and selfless group of people. Volunteers have been a pivotal part of our past and present, and they will be an important part of our future."

Why do our volunteers choose to spend their time at Descanso?

**Amy Karbelnig**

**"I would encourage people to consider volunteering at Descanso because the organization is thoughtful and responsive to volunteers. I learn something new every day I'm here while having the opportunity to give back."**

If you want to join them, find out more at [www.descansogardens.org/support/volunteer/](http://www.descansogardens.org/support/volunteer/).



**Mike Lichtman**

“Being at Descanso puts people in a good mood, like being on vacation. It is always enjoyable to be interacting with people when they are enjoying themselves. Evidence of this is how many strangers pleasantly greet each other when passing others in the gardens.”

**Heidi Neilson**

“It keeps me committed to spending time in such a beautiful place. The employees, volunteers, and foundation are committed to doing what is best for the land and the community. I really admire all of the effort put into keeping this place special, beautiful, and engaging.”

**Julie Witter**

“As a second-grade teacher, this was my favorite place to come for a field trip with my class. I told myself that when I retired, this was the place where I would volunteer. I retired in 2008 and have volunteered in the Rose Garden since 2009. It is my happy place.”

**Marie Poore**

“I don’t just love one thing! I love the peaceful, meditative feeling I experience while walking in the gardens. I love the different areas of the garden and their uniqueness. I love interacting with guests, especially during their first visit to Descanso. The gardens are such a gift. Thank you for allowing me to volunteer and have such a cool place to hang out once or twice a week! As well as continue my own personal journey of learning & growing as I am heading toward my retirement.”

**Victoria Bodwell**

“I call my days (2 per week) at Descanso my zen days. I am in the clean air, a part of nature, often working by myself, having time to reflect on life and days past and future, and other times, engaging with other like-minded people — loving our time in this environment and restoring our faith in the human spirit. I can not imagine a more rewarding or worthwhile way to spend six hours of my week.”

**Maureen Harrigan**

“I spent my life working in early childhood education, as well as raising three children, and I believe this generation of children have little contact with nature. That’s what Descanso Gardens offers: A place children can run and touch nature and a place where parents don’t have to say ‘don’t touch’ all the time.”

## DONOR PROFILE

# A sense of belonging in the garden

Nel Graham, a long-time member, volunteer, and supporter of Descanso, considers the garden her second home.

### A passion for the garden

Since becoming a member in 2012, Nel has developed a profound love for the garden, especially during the uncertain times of the pandemic when she found solace in regular walks. Immersing herself in its beauty, Nel truly feels a sense of belonging.

"It's a captivating jewel," she said. "It's right here, local, and it's beautiful."

As a volunteer, Nel finds the gardens are not just a place; it's a family. She enjoys the dedication and teamwork of the employees and volunteers who contribute to the care and experience of the gardens.

Having worked as a science teacher, Nel possesses an insatiable curiosity and a natural talent for teaching others. Her philosophy revolves around the principle of "never stop learning." Inspired by this belief, she actively volunteers her time and provides support to Descanso Gardens. Nel is a proud member of the Perennial Circle, an esteemed group of the garden's most devoted patrons.

### Sharing her love

On a recent weekday, Nel was volunteering at the train station. Her heart particularly resonates with the train. It is a place where everyone is happy.

"It's my favorite thing in the garden," she said. "Kids, families, older people, they all love it."

For more information about supporting Descanso Gardens, please visit [descansogardens.org](https://descansogardens.org).



# In the garden

## Eat

The gardens have partnered with Chef Richard Mead (Farmhouse at Roger’s Gardens) to open Farmhouse at Descanso Gardens — a farm-to-table restaurant, which will not only transform the guest experience but will also become a fine dining destination in Southern California. Construction will begin this year. Located in what is currently Van de Kamp Hall, the restaurant will feature



indoor and outdoor dining and a bar. It will also have a fully electric kitchen, demonstrating Descanso’s commitment to environmental stewardship for decades to come. Mead’s food is known for being fresh, seasonal cuisine.

*Above: Farmhouse at Descanso Gardens will feature indoor and outdoor dining. Right: A new train station will include model trains in a garden environment.*

## Chug



**A train glides over you on a redwood trellis, small replicas of famous train stations look like they were made from things found at Descanso, and a beautiful garden surrounds it all.**

Whimsy and wonder await when Descanso opens its new train station this July. We know our members and visitors love the railroad — they tell us all the time — but the train has never been reliable so in 2023, Descanso purchased an all-new electric train to the delight of visitors. Now, even bigger changes are coming. A new train station and model train area will debut in what is currently Nature’s Table this July. The area’s theme will change every six months, with famous train stations being featured for the opening. All the stations will be intricately handcrafted with natural materials, including twigs, bark, leaves, acorns, and pebbles.

The model trains will be created by Applied Imagination — a company that creates iconic botanical models and sculptures paired with beloved G-scale model trains. These small-scale botanical artworks are created in a Kentucky workshop. Applied Imagination has created countless award-winning garden railway displays across the country, many of which have been running for two to three decades, including current installations at the United States Botanic Garden, Chicago Botanic Garden, and New York Botanical Garden.

# Native berries

*David Bare*  
*Director of Horticulture and Garden Operations*

The best plants serve more than one purpose. They may have attractive spring flowers and beautiful fall foliage, or serve as a hedge or support wildlife. Rarely do you get all of the above. But some of the plants in the genus *Ribes* cover all these bases.

Plants in this genus are commonly separated into two groups according to the presence of thorns and spines. Currants are spineless and carry clusters of flowers. Gooseberries have spiny and thorny canes and are dotted with small flowers. Both are in the *Ribes*.

## A hardy plant for your garden

Fortunately, we have a healthy population of golden currant, *Ribes aureum* here at Descanso. This species is found all over the US, with the exception of the Southeastern states. It is happy to tolerate any soil condition you plant it in if you make sure that it does not stay wet in the summer. Here at the garden you can find it popping up in the oak forest as well as out in the open areas of the natives garden, a testament to its amenable constitution. Its tolerance for oak understory makes it a valuable player in native gardening.

Excellent wildlife plants, most *Ribes* bloom in early spring, providing that much-needed nectar to early emerging bumblebees and hummingbirds. *Ribes aureum* has small golden yellow tubular flowers that are amongst the first blooming in the native garden. By late summer and fall, the efforts of all those pollinators are yielding golden, red, or black fruits relished by birds and other foraging wildlife.

## Beautiful pink flowers

In the Rose Garden, we grow *Ribes sanguineum* 'Claremont.' This is a selection of what is commonly called the flowering currant. At Descanso, it is

situated in front of a substantial sycamore tree which forms a wonderful white background for its small chains of pendulous pink flowers. These are always produced in the earliest days of spring and are a delight to introduce to visitors on tours of the Rose Garden, when the early fragrant daphne, magnolia and daffodils are at their peaks. This is a native currant selection that seems to tolerate more water than is typical of others.

## A plant wildlife loves

My next selection doesn't play nearly as nicely with others as the previous two. *Ribes speciosum*, the fuchsia flowered gooseberry has magnificent, dangly, deepest-red tubular flowers, each little bell displaying a cluster of exerted stamens. I'm certain the devil's wife has earrings modeled after these waxy and seductive creatures.

Whatever you are in it for; wildlife attracting, beautiful flowers, garden snacks, or something to fill in those shady spots, it's worth a look to see if there is a *Ribes* right for your garden.



*Beautiful spring flowers, beautiful fall foliage, and wildlife loves it - genus Ribes covers all these bases.*



# Ribes speciosum

Whatever you are in it for; wildlife attracting, beautiful flowers, garden snacks, or something to fill in those shady spots, it's worth a look to see if there is a *Ribes* right for your garden.

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A close-up photograph of a cholla cactus (Cylindropuntia) with several green, cylindrical segments. The segments are covered in small, sharp, green spines and have small, brown, circular scars. The background is blurred, showing more of the cactus and some brown, rocky ground.

**Become a  
member!**

Learn more at [descansogardens.org](http://descansogardens.org)