



@LARGE
AI WEIWEI
ON ALCATRAZ

Alcatraz Background THE GARDENS OF ALCATRAZ

"The plants tell the other story of Alcatraz--the human and humane story of an individual and group effort to bring a bit of beauty to a grim place." - Russell A. Beatty, Gardens of Alcatraz

Many of the art installations presented in *@Large: Ai Weiwei on Alcatraz* draw inspiration from the island's natural landscapes and wildlife. For more than a century, the gardens of Alcatraz were an important part of everyday life for the officers, families, and prisoners confined there by duty or sentence.

Before human settlement, Alcatraz had only a thin deposit of soil that supported sparse native grasses and shrubs. When the island transitioned from an Army fortress to a military prison in 1861, the military began importing soil from nearby Angel Island and the Presidio, and as early as 1865, planted Victorian-style gardens adjacent to the citadel on the summit.

In the 1920s, the military initiated an island-wide beautification project, and prisoners planted hundreds of trees and shrubs and many pounds of seeds. In 1933, when the federal Bureau of Prisons took control of Alcatraz, Secretary to the Warden Fred Reichel began caring for the gardens left by the army, which by then included hillside terraces, a rose garden, and a greenhouse. Reichel convinced the warden to allow prisoners to garden, and with the advice of prominent California horticulturists, helped to direct the transformation of the island's western slopes into a series of gardens. In 1941, prisoner Elliott Michener began a nine-year career as an inmate gardener—he built a toolshed and a greenhouse, received permission to order seeds and bulbs, and credited this experience with providing him a "lasting interest in creativity." During the federal prison years, the former Officers' Row became the central garden on the island's east side.

The island's gardens were abandoned after the federal prison closed in 1963. Plants unable to survive without maintenance and irrigation soon disappeared, while others spread wild over the island. Structural elements of the gardens—including retaining walls, steps, and railings—deteriorated under the overgrowth.

In 2003, the Garden Conservancy, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and National Park Service began a collaboration to restore the gardens. Today, Alcatraz is an island alive with colorful plants gathered decades ago from around the world, and complemented by newly introduced plants. These historic gardens not only illustrate the importance of gardens to the human spirit, but also the ecological benefits and aesthetic possibilities of sustainable gardening. Through the Alcatraz Historic Gardens Project, the partner organizations continue to preserve, rebuild, and maintain the gardens created by those who lived on the island during its military and prison eras, and interpret their history, horticulture, and cultural significance for today's visitors.

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