



# ARID BEAUTY

A VISIT TO THE HUNTINGTON DESERT GARDEN

text by Sarah Lifton photography by Grant Mudford



**M**other Nature has a wicked sense of humor. Consider the white floss silk tree, a large South American specimen with a thorn-studded trunk and delicate leaves that give way to a blizzard of cottony bolls each fall. Or the succulent milkweeds—African natives that produce exotic, often malodorous, flowers sometimes embellished with hairs that flutter in the breeze. Even the melocacti, which seem dignified enough most of the year, forsake decorum to masquerade as fez-capped Shriners right before they bloom.

The Desert Garden encompasses only 12 of the 150 acres comprising the Huntington Botanical Gardens, but within its confines reside some of the most fantastical, flamboyant, and even amusing denizens of the plant world. Like a carnival of vegetation, the collection—some five thousand species strong—features scores of attractions with singular characteristics that both astound and delight half a million visitors each year.

To Henry E. Huntington, developing his San Marino estate just after the turn of the century, cactus and its cousins probably seemed more like a practical joke. According to the memoirs of the late William Hertrich, creator of the Desert Garden and the Huntington's superintendent for more than four decades, the railroad magnate harbored a keen antipathy for the species, having suffered an uncomfortably close encounter with a cactus in the Arizona desert. When Hertrich requested permission to develop a cactus garden on a barren hillock bordering the main drive, it was only grudgingly that Huntington gave his assent.

As time wore on, however, and Hertrich began gathering plants from farther and farther afield, the garden not only grew into one of the most important assemblages of xerophytic flora in the world but also became a source of great pleasure and pride for Huntington. "Hertrich was a fine landscape architect," observes John Trager, present curator of the Huntington's desert collection. "All of the designs in place today that date from that time are his. He just had a good sense of how to combine plants to make them look like a naturalistic and pleasing landscape."

During the 1920s, as Huntington was developing the adjacent land, Hertrich was able to expand the Desert Garden by four acres when earth removed through street grading was used to fill in an open reservoir at the foot of the garden. This area, delineated by large yuccas, is home today to most of the Mexican species in the collection. The most significant feature of the Desert Garden—the rockery lining the main pathway—is also of Hertrich's design, installed in 1930, three years after Huntington's death. There, amid five carloads of lava rock, grows a profusion of low, downy *Mammillaria* and golden barrel cacti, arranged against a backdrop of towering *Cephalocereus* and frothy yellow palo







verde. Hertrich, who retired in the late 1940s, was instrumental in recruiting Myron Kimnach as the Huntington's botanical curator in 1962. It was under Kimnach's stewardship that the majority of succulents were acquired. The conservatory was also erected during his tenure, which ended with his retirement in 1988.

While William Hertrich would likely feel at home in the mature Desert Garden, it is, like any living entity, in constant flux. Working around the various life cycles of the specimens themselves, the staff—consisting of Trager, garden curator Joe Clements, and three full-time gardeners—is slowly mapping out and refining the garden's geographic organization. In 1983 the Baja California section was replanted, and there are plans to rework additional beds. "We're going to continue to reorganize," Trager says, "but there are some beds that have large specimens—a huge California live oak in the middle of the Canary Islands bed, for example—that we aren't going to move for a while." And too, some replanted areas will forsake conventional and staid geographic or taxonomic organizational schemes in favor of aesthetics, with dynamic forms and colors combined purely for horticultural display.

Cacti are only one of more than thirty botanical families represented in the collection, which also includes succulent begonias, orchids, morning glories, grapes, oxalis, and relatives of sunflowers. And, like the tourists who flock to the Huntington, the garden features a rich mix of natives from all over the world. Contrary to popular belief, Southern California's Mediterranean climate, with its mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers, is not especially congenial to vegetation weaned on cool, dry winters and heavy summer rainfall. "The more tolerant plants survive out in the garden with supplemental summer watering," Trager says, "but the other sensitive ones we keep in the conservatory."

Sensitive or not, the contorted behemoths, translucent nubbins, strange obelisks, and weedy stalks so insubstantial that even the delicate flowers they bear seem to tax them to their limit make this a lusty, assertive garden, one that will never be planted or pruned into submission. Familiar species usually seen growing decorously in pots expand here to menacing proportions. A *Hyloterens* twines madly up the trunk of a Canary Island palm; another epiphyte boldly claims the seat of an oak—native meeting émigré in an ironic juxtaposition. Creeping devil cacti engulf the earth like restless overgrown serpents, while tiny Lithops, its leaves like abbreviated elephant feet, prudently clings to the ground.

This is nature's side show, replete with surprises, illusions, curiosities, and enchantment. As the audience, we can only marvel and applaud. □

*The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, located at 1151 Oxford Road in San Marino, are open Tuesday through Sunday, 1 to 4:30 P.M. Reservations are required for Sunday visits. Call 818-405-2141 for information.*