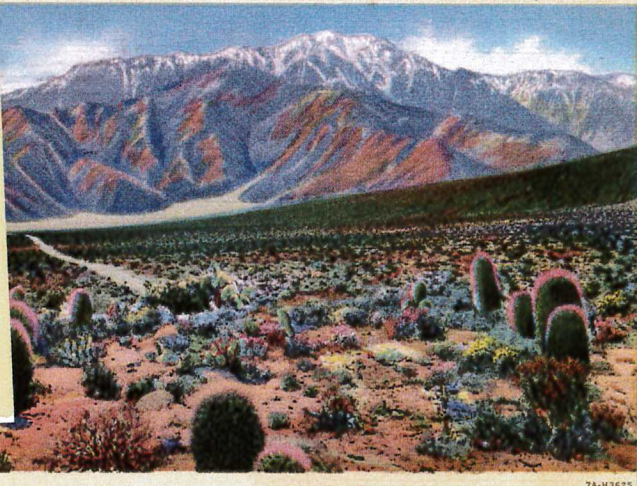


◀ Yesterday

# Gardening in the desert



Vintage postcards:  
TOP: The Devil's Garden.

MIDDLE: the rose garden at  
The Desert Inn and the cactus  
specimen garden and fountain  
at the Palm Springs Hotel.

RIGHT: The wisteria arbor at  
the Oasis Hotel and a view  
of Mt. San Jacinto from The  
Devil's Garden.

"I'm an enemy of the average" stated world-famous Polish opera singer, socialite and six-time-married Madame Ganna Walska, who certainly wasn't average. In 1941 at the age of 58, she purchased a sprawling Montecito estate and spent the remainder of her long life cultivating the 37-acre property she named Lotusland.

Fascinated with desert plants, Walska created a stunningly beautiful garden at her Santa Barbara home, one that rivaled other spectacular landscapes seen up and down California in the first half of the 20th century.

Another notable early desert garden was developed for the California Pacific International Exposition in San Diego. Even today, The 1935 (Old) Cactus Garden contains some of the largest cactus and succulent specimens in Balboa Park.

In San Marino near Pasadena, railroad magnate Henry Huntington's extravagant gardens complimented his even more fabulous art collection. The Huntington Desert Garden, covering 10 acres on the several-hundred-acre property, is unparalleled in the world. Featuring towering mounds of golden barrel cactus among the more than 5,000 species of succulents and desert plants from fabulously distant climes, this desert garden is now nearly a century old.

But all these remarkable desert gardens were nurtured in the temperate Mediterranean climate of coastal California. Hard at work cultivating amid the sand dunes and heat of the Coachella Valley during those early years were brave, determined and decidedly un-average gardeners.



## MOORTEN'S DESERTLAND GARDENS



LEFT: Patricia and Chester "Cactus Slim" Moorten in their Desertland garden, 1964.

BOTTOM: Wellwood Murray relaxes in his garden with a trusty friend, 1897.

BELOW: The discussion centers on date cultivation in King Gillette's garden.



### PARTICULAR TO THE DESERT

Nothing about desert gardening or gardens was average. Early settlers of Palm Springs found naturally occurring clusters of native plants and gave them imaginative names, like The Devil's Garden, which denoted a level area near Whitewater, north and west of Palm Springs. It is described in J. Smeaton Chase's "Our Araby" as an open desert mesa, "a natural cactus garden, where many species of cacti are associated in what amounts to a thicket of these odd vegetable forms." (He also noted that the trip from the village of Palm Springs over to see it would take three hours on horseback.) Chase specifically subtitled his book "Garden of the Sun" in deference to the remarkable landscape.

Imagine the astonishment of early visitors to this area who had never seen the odd forms of cacti, the bright pink of bougainvillea or the burst of orange and yellow that comes with a blossom of Poinciana, the Mexican bird of paradise. Perhaps fearful of losing his own paradise, in the foreword to the book Chase sets out his purpose: "to invite people of the right kind—not too many—to a region that is meant for the discerning few...."

### THE DISCERNING FEW

At the end of the 19th century, Dr. Welwood Murray assiduously cultivated the sandy desert soil and fought off bud-blasting winds to produce early-ripening fruit







to send to the coastal markets. The first few visitors from the East Coast staying at his 1896 Palm Springs Hotel were delighted by the abundance of citrus and vegetables available just for the picking.

As new settlers arrived, the pioneer McKinney family astutely sold cactus, agave and palms along with building supplies for new homeowners eager to adorn their yards.

Chester "Cactus Slim" Moorten purchased photographer Stephen Willard's house in 1938 and set to work creating a mysterious and glorious garden. In his shop, he made a career of selling unusual specimens and cultivating curiosities for visitors. Moorten's wife Patricia was long considered the ultimate authority on desert horticulture. Today, the Moorten Botanical Garden in Palm Springs still attracts visitors, and the couple's son Clark Moorten carries on the same tradition.



TOP: The Palm Springs Hotel, shaded by trees.

LEFT: Melba Bennett in her gardening dungarees talks with Edith and Carl Lykken.





ABOVE: Jane Lykken Neel and husband Earl Neel party in Palm Springs.

RIGHT: Saguaro specimen in King Gillette's garden.

Melba Bennett, founder in 1955 of the Palm Springs Historical Society, was a wealthy socialite who was equally comfortable attired in a couture ball gown or in dungarees working in her garden.

Her little tome, the "Palm Springs Garden Book," was presented by the Garden Club of Palm Springs to share their members' collective experiences with the difficult job of cultivating the desert. It is illustrated with little sketches done by Bennett who also wrote that the book was to be "a Primer for the desert gardeners. An introduction to a 'sport' which demands no expensive costuming, which is easier on the temper than golf or tennis, which can be held to

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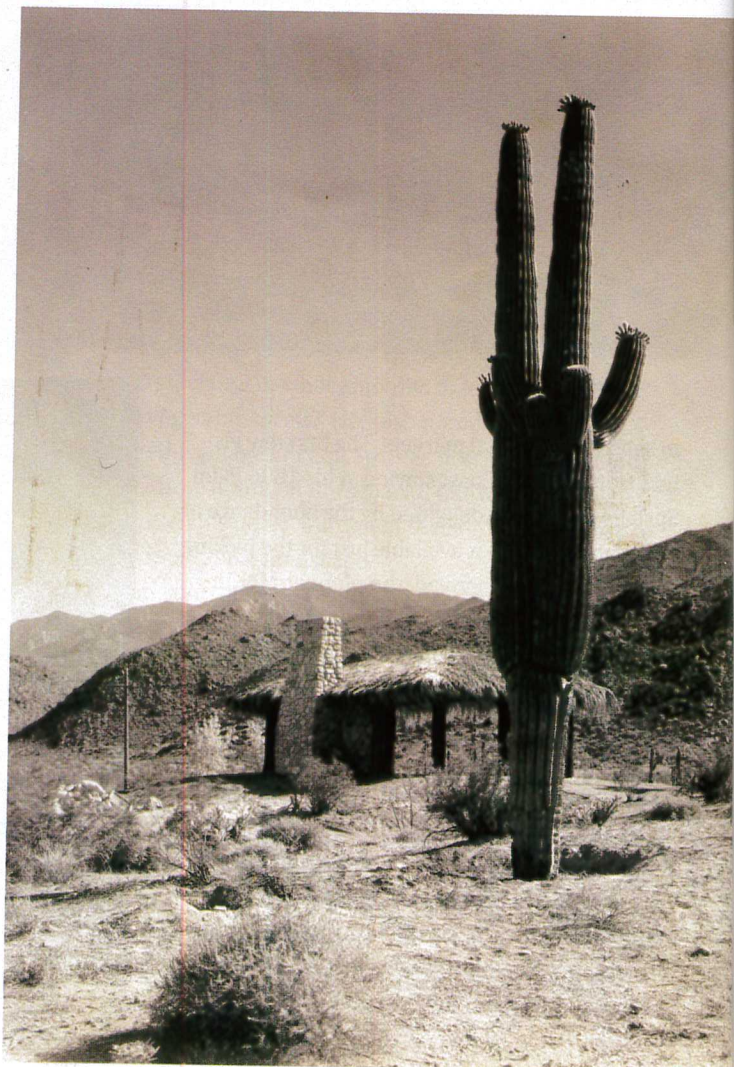
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a minimum of expense and effort by the introduction of native, drought-resistant plants, or can develop into a purse-taxing luxury, and muscle-developing hobby if you become an addict."

The desert was, indeed, home to a good supply of addicted gardeners. Neel's Nursery provided them the plant material for decades, and Earl Neel provided local blooming color with a twinkle in his eye and a ready smile. By 1970, banker, developer and first mayor of Palm Springs Phil Boyd was prescient about the coming resort development of the valley floor, and founded The Living Desert to preserve a swath of natural open space and desert flora. As it happened, Neel's Nursery on Sunrise Way in Palm Springs ultimately made way for development.



Desert gardening required a certain faith and persistence, stubbornness and delight in the subtle. Thanks to dedicated gardeners, the cultivated desert in the aggregate holds its own place in the panoply of stellar California gardens, showcasing unique and spectacular possibilities afforded by the southwest climate. And the results are certainly not average.

—TRACY CONRAD

ABOVE: Looking south toward Smoke Tree Mountain in the distance, the McKinney family's Desert Nursery and Palm Springs Builder Supply Co. are along State Hwy. 111 on the left.

#### » DETAILS

Tracy Conrad is a board member of the Palm Springs Historical Society, and also of the Palm Springs Preservation Foundation. She has served on the Historic Site Preservation Board and the Planning Commission for the City of Palm Springs.

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