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Historic Gardens of Alcatraz Win Two Prestigious Preservation Awards

Note to Editor: Downloadable photos available at
www.gardenconservancy.org/alcatraz_photo_page.htm

(SAN FRANCISCO Sept 21, 2009) The Historic Gardens of Alcatraz received two prestigious awards from the California Preservation Foundation – the highly regarded Trustees Award for Excellence and an Annual Preservation Design Award in the small rehabilitation category, according to Antonia Adezio, president of the Garden Conservancy, the national nonprofit that has spearheaded the rehabilitation of the gardens on “The Rock” since 2003. They were presented on Saturday, September 19 at the InterContinental Mark Hopkins Hotel in San Francisco.

The preservation awards are a statewide hallmark, showcasing preservation design excellence. They celebrate and recognize exemplary work in historic preservation, restoration, rehabilitation, sustainability and other significant categories in the preservation field. The Trustees Award for Excellence in Historic Preservation, presented to only one project this year, recognizes outstanding achievement in the field of historic preservation, and has only been given in the past to the Golden Gate Bridge Seismic Retrofit, Griffith Observatory, and Leland Stanford Mansion.

“There is no other Alcatraz in the world and I seriously doubt there is a landscape that is comparable,” said Chris Pattillo, principal of PGAdesign in Oakland and member of California Preservation Foundation design awards jury. “The rehabilitation work that was done on Alcatraz under any circumstances would have been an extraordinary achievement, but what is truly extraordinary here is that the vast majority of work was accomplished by committed volunteers led by the late Carola Ashford, whose commitment and passion as the project manager made it all possible. We’re grateful to the Garden Conservancy for all that they’ve done to restore this unique cultural landscape.”

A rehabilitation of the island’s long-neglected historic gardens, the project began in 2003. Today, the thriving gardens are a stark contrast to the somber prison. After extensive planning, removal of overgrowth, planting, and repair of deteriorated structures, the gardens are again blooming for the island’s thousands of daily visitors. The project team not only revived the gardens created by those who lived on the island during its military and prison eras, but also developed materials that interpret the gardens’ history, horticulture, and cultural significance.

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The 22-acre island was first inhabited in the 1800s when it became an army fortress; it transitioned to a military prison in 1861, and from 1934 to 1963, it gained notoriety as a federal penitentiary. In 1972, the island became a unit of the National Park Service's Golden Gate National Recreation Area and has since become its most visited site, with more than 1.3 million visitors annually. The island is designated a National Historic Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

During the military and federal prison periods, staff and prisoners transformed much of the island's landscape into intensively maintained gardens. The gardens served as refuges from the harsh surroundings, becoming an important part of everyday life for officers, families, and prisoners confined to the island.

With the closure of the federal prison in 1963, the gardens were abandoned. Plants unable to survive without maintenance and irrigation soon disappeared, while others spread over the island. Structural elements of the gardens deteriorated under the overgrowth. There was no longer any sense that the island had been planted and well maintained through most of its historic period.

In 2003, the Garden Conservancy and Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy formed a partnership with the National Park Service to bring the gardens back to life. They established a project team and formed a volunteer-gardener program. After an intensive year of removing accumulated plant debris, the team discovered that many of the garden's historic structural features—terraces, paths, railings, and foundations—were still in place but needed to be repaired or replaced. Historic plants that had been buried began to flourish after removal of invasive species.

In 2005, the team prepared an island-wide cultural landscape inventory, and upon its completion, chose rehabilitation as the appropriate treatment because there was insufficient information for a complete restoration and many of the non-surviving historic plantings would require too much maintenance or water if replanted.

The project team prepared detailed treatment plans for five garden areas after researching photos, plans, maps, and oral interviews. Referring to historic photos, mostly from the penitentiary era, helped the team determine appropriate plantings with low maintenance and water needs but similar in type, form, scale, and color.

Over a four-year period, the team repaired the built landscape (dating back to both the military and penitentiary eras), regraded slopes, and replanted the gardens. Volunteers, who logged in more than 22,000 hours from 2003 through 2008, were critical to the success of this effort. The project is also a model of sustainability, with a water catchment system used for irrigation, a composting system that recycles the gardens' biomass, and a palette of drought-tolerant plants.

The interpretive program that the team developed ensures that a large and diverse audience can appreciate the gardens as an important part of our cultural heritage. Docent tours are offered three times a week, a free self-guided brochure is available on the island, eight waysides provide historical information, and a website is dedicated to the project.

As Delphine Hirasuna wrote in *Gardens of Alcatraz*, "The gardens are testaments to the human spirit, to the desire to create life and beauty even in a forbidding environment. Perhaps this above all is what makes them so inspiring--and so touching."

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ABOUT THE GARDEN CONSERVANCY

Across the nation there are historic, symbolic, rare, hidden, abandoned, flourishing, threatened gardens. Inspired by their fragile beauty and historical distinction, the Garden Conservancy helps preserve these remarkable spaces, then shares with the public their profound cultural significance.

Overview The Garden Conservancy is a national nonprofit organization founded in 1989 that preserves exceptional gardens across the America for the public's enjoyment and education. The Garden Conservancy works in partnership with individual garden owners and public and private organizations, using its legal, horticultural and financial resources to develop ways to secure a garden's future. It incorporates aesthetic, horticultural, historical and cultural considerations into short- and long-term preservation goals. By helping to protect and save exceptional gardens, the Conservancy encourages greater appreciation and stewardship of these fragile resources, which are an important part of America's cultural heritage. The Conservancy relies on grants and the generosity of individuals and corporations to support its ambitious programs and services.

Preservation Projects: The Conservancy is presently helping to preserve dozens of outstanding gardens from coast to coast and is providing technical assistance to many more through its Preservation Assistance Service. The Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek, California, the Conservancy's first preservation project, is now a thriving public garden. Among the current 16 garden preservation projects are Longue Vue House & Gardens in New Orleans, which suffered extensive damage by Hurricane Katrina, the extraordinary topiary garden created by a self-taught artist Pearl Fryar in Bishopville, South Carolina, and the historic gardens of Alcatraz.

Open Days: To strengthen the public's commitment to garden preservation, the Conservancy presents the *Open Days Program*, America's only national private garden-visiting program. Each year, hundreds of garden owners from coast to coast open their magnificent spaces to more than 75,000 visitors.

Educational Programs: To promote preservation and inspire conservation, the Garden Conservancy organizes lectures, symposia, and garden tours for its members and the public. These educational programs disseminate technical expertise and enable people to experience the beauty of some the nation's exceptional gardens. In addition, every year the Marco Polo Stufano Garden Conservancy Fellowship offers an up-and-coming gardener an opportunity to gain valuable experience in public garden management.

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