

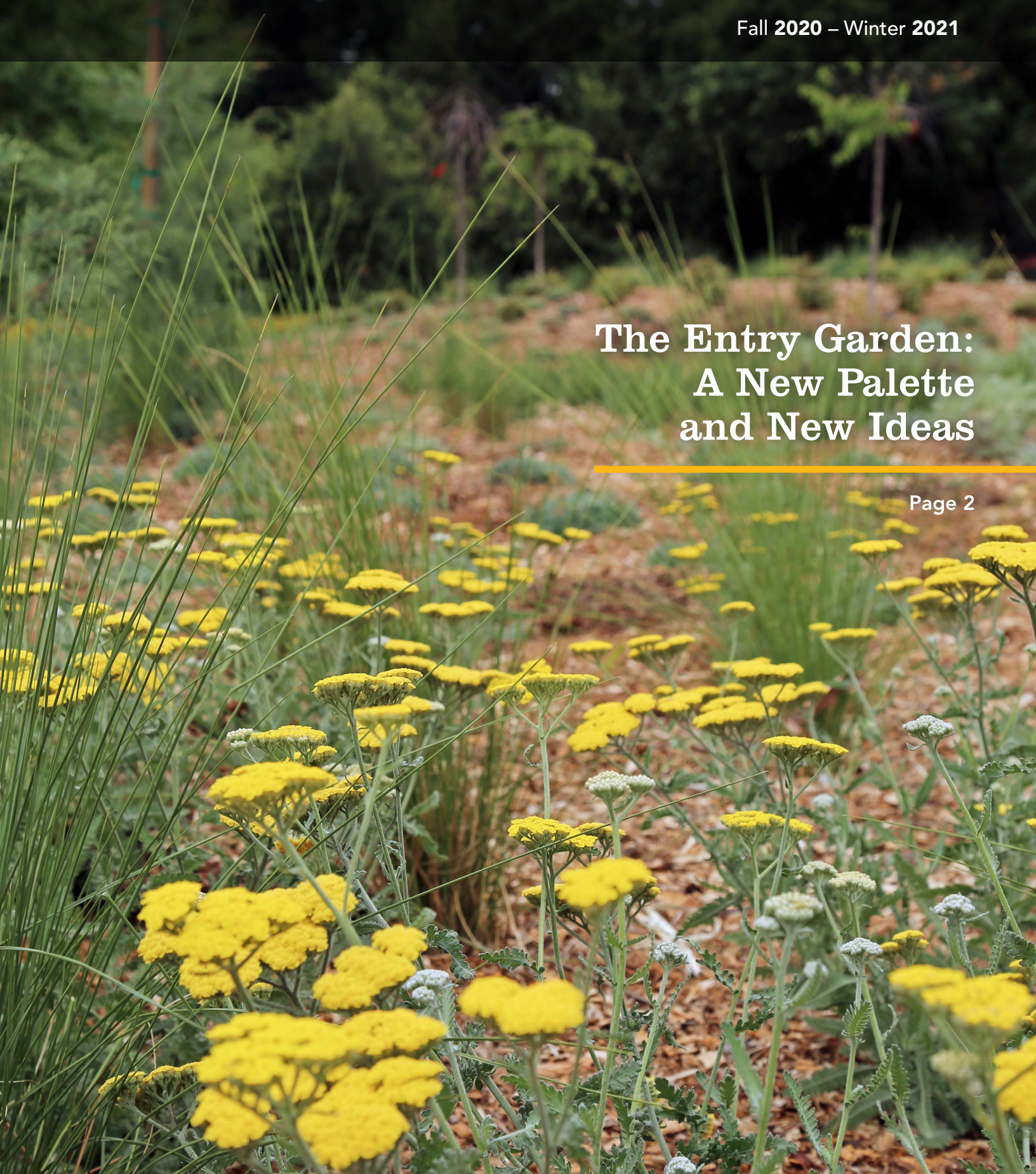
# DESCANSO

Fall 2020 – Winter 2021

## The Entry Garden: A New Palette and New Ideas

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Page 2



# Plans Change, but We Keep Growing

by Juliann Rooke, Executive Director



At the beginning of the year, like so many, we made our plans for 2020. Here at Descanso, they included music and educational programs, art exhibitions and tours among our blooms. Of course that all came to an end in a dramatic way.

In the past months, we have navigated a closing and reopening because of the pandemic, and we have witnessed people around the nation, and the globe, speaking out against injustice and inequality. These events have forced me to make difficult decisions, to challenge my team to reimagine Descanso, and to confront the areas where I, as a leader, and we, as an organization, need to improve.

From our closing in March to reopening in May, we spent hours looking at our operations and ways we could make things safe for staff and visitors. We are fortunate that Descanso is an outdoor space, which makes it possible to practice social distancing. We require face coverings, changed the way guests enter the garden, and closed indoor spaces. Our members and visitors were grateful that we re-opened, and we were so glad to welcome them back.

In June, tragic events, protests and calls to action forced us to consider with new urgency, systemic racism and Descanso's role in enacting change. Although Descanso had begun work related to diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion with our senior staff and board in 2019, I now feel newly resolved to improve my own understanding of racism and how museums, gardens and Descanso Gardens specifically can play a role in addressing this issue.

The first half of this year has demonstrated to me how flexible Descanso Gardens is as an organization, and how much we have been able to accomplish in spite of our challenges. We installed our new wastewater treatment plant (page 7) and the front entry garden that its treated water will irrigate; we began an expansion of the beloved Ancient Forest, made possible by a generous gift (page 12); and we welcomed many new members and supporters of the Descanso mission.

As we look forward to the end of 2020 and 2021, I wish I knew what was in store. For now, I just ask you to join me as Descanso continues its journey into the future.

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## Our Mission

Descanso Gardens is a unique Southern California landscape distinguished by its specialized botanic collections, historical significance, and rare natural beauty. Our mission is to practice exemplary stewardship of Descanso's distinctive character and assets; offer people an experience close to nature; and cultivate understanding of the natural world and people's place in it through inspiration, education and example.

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# The Entry Garden Comes Alive

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

It was only a little over a half year ago that we started removing dead redwoods, brush and various and sundry overgrown trees and shrubs from the entry garden. We were left with a landscape run roughshod by tractors and skid loaders. Roots and stumps lay hidden just below the surface. A rogue's gallery of weeds lay in waiting, enough variety to fill a weed science textbook.



At an acre and a half, the project was intimidating, somedays I would even say daunting. The planting portion of the front-drive project arrived not long after the coronavirus took center stage. Diamond Landscape laid down 46,100 linear feet of drip irrigation tubing, about 8 and 3-quarters of a mile. Descanso's Horticulture staff stayed planting on their heels, a dance of plants and tubing.

There is a reason that there is enough tubing to make it to Trader Joes in La Cañada Flintridge. We wanted our recycled water to go right where it was needed, in the root zones of thirsty, sun-baked, front-drive beauties. Every drop counts in Southern California and though there are claims that our recycled water is clean enough to drink, we still wanted to keep it at soil level. Much water is lost to evaporation and drifts with overhead sprinklers, and there is always an increased risk of foliar diseases. Drip gets the

water where you want and as a result isn't as likely to awaken that ever anxious weeds waiting in the soil.

There are a few disadvantages as well. Primarily, there is the issue of not seeing the water get to your plants. Tucked nicely under a bed of mulch, the tubing isn't visible and neither is the wet soil. You have to rely on your finger or an assessment of plant health to determine when the time to water has come. A sharp shovel will make quick work of drip tubing too, so you better locate before you dig.

We chiseled and hacked our way through January and February with the impossible slowly working toward maybe. The front gates shut the third week of March and the tension mounted, but we had sight of the finish line. Then we had to mulch it all.



We also built four *Hügelkultur* mounds in the entry garden landscape. This ancient technique of composting wood in place has met with a bit of a resurgence of late. It is being used for everything from landscapes to vegetable gardens. Basically, you are burying logs and branches among soil, compost and woodchips in a trench, packing the material as it rises, until you have a mound. The wood acts as a wick taking in moisture and slowly releasing and is thus very water retentive. Mycorrhizas and other microorganisms flourish in this environment. Carbon is sequestered, rich soil is built through the decomposition of the wood and a local organic resource is put to good use. And the addition of elevation and contour change has much improved the aesthetic. So far, other than having to evict a few squirrels we have been happy with the results.

“The finished landscape is much like a mountain meadow that one would encounter after a long uphill hike through the forest.”

### Concept Plan – Phase 1 Front Entry





Elisa Read is the Horticulture Specialist with RIOS who designed our front entrance garden. She was always a pleasure to work with whether she was collecting quantifiable environmental data or helping us haul 15-gallon plants out of the nursery. Elisa considered pollinators, climate appropriateness, year-round interest, low maintenance, and the ability to thrive in the reclaimed water environment as factors determining a plant's eligibility for selection. We ended up with over 60 varieties of plants in this landscape. They range from the lovely valley oak selected to stand on the *Hügelkultur* mounds, to wispy grasses.

"Our inspiration for the front-entry landscape at Descanso Gardens is derived from the botanical garden's oak woodlands that are underplanted with delicate color," Read said in an email. "Our plant selection was based on bringing modern environmental sensibilities to the forefront of the design, and includes native, climate-appropriate plants that are beneficial to wildlife, low-maintenance, and tolerant of recycled water."

"California's plein air paintings also influenced the assortment of subtle colors, a palette purpose-driven to evoke the notion of brush strokes flowing through the garden. Several varieties of *Muhlenbergia capillaris* will sway in the wind and provide quaint stories of hues – from spring pink to summer gold." The native *Aristida purpurea* provides a similar effect in the spring.

To me, the finished landscape is much like a mountain meadow that one would encounter after a long uphill hike through the forest. It has been nice to watch the colors change as the bloom palette has moved through these two seasons, from puddles of pink *Arctotis* in early spring to the golden mounds of *Achillea* gracing the garden now. The design embraces the concept that gardens are dynamic and constantly change while fulfilling the original intent. Gardens are always a mingling of culture and nature, art and experimentation, growth and change and evolution. It is a pleasure to be standing at this point where its character is still unfolding.

# A New Way to Water

In the southeast corner of the parking lot sit four large tanks connected to giant silver boxes by a highway of pipes and hoses. Some visitors have questioned whether Descanso is installing a brewery, but alas we are not. What you are seeing is a membrane bioreactor (MBR) and the future of water at the garden.

## What is an MBR exactly?

The MBR will take wastewater Descanso produces and turn it into water that can be used to water the garden.

## How does it work?

Water is pumped to the tank and travels through separate chambers for processing. The first stop is called the “headworks” where large non-organic solids, such as paper, are removed. In the aeration tank the solids are down and oxygen is added to this tank that supports a huge colony of microorganisms that feed on organic waste. The next stop is the “anoxic zone.” The oxygen is turned off, which kills the microorganisms. As a final cleaning, the recycled water goes through ultraviolet disinfection.

## How much water will it produce?

When in full use, it will produce 40,000 gallons of recycled water a day. It will now be used to water the entry garden.





# Passionately purple: The Friendship Sage

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

I am a sucker for deep velvety purple. Any flower I encounter with that saturated amethyst jewel tone is pretty likely to end up in my garden. I've also been obsessed with salvias for years now. At one time, I was propagating over 30 species. After a time I went into a salvia recovery program and learned to limit myself to a few choice specimens, but I have been known to tumble off the wagon at plant sales and finer nurseries. One I would never give up is *Salvia 'Amistad'*. It fulfills my need for salvias and deep purple in abundance.

This salvia was found at a plant sale in Argentina and introduced to the wider horticultural trade in 2012. Rolando Uria, the agronomy professor who discovered the plant named it 'Amistad' the Spanish word for friendship, to express his wish that this plant be freely shared. Friendship sage is thought to be a naturally occurring hybrid between *Salvia guaranitica*, anise-scented sage, and *Salvia gesneriiflora*, Big Mexican Scarlet Sage. This is pretty awesome parentage with the Big Mexican Scarlet Sage growing to 10 feet and having incredible scarlet flowers that do not start until late autumn. Anise-scented sage has indigo flowers and tops out around 6 feet.

'Amistad' grows to about 5 feet tall and 6 feet wide and starts blooming early in the spring and only gets better as the heat of summer comes on. I am not the only one with a purple passion for this plant. It seems to be the biggest hummingbird attractant in the entire garden. It is great entertainment to watch them guard their sage domains, dive bombing and twittering at one another any time a visitor tries to come in for a little nectar. Hummingbirds have little regard for the "friendship" part of friendship sage.

This plant is easy to grow. It benefits from a little clean up pruning in mid-summer (prepare to be dive bombed) and will even take some light shade. Like most of the sub-tropical salvias, it can bloom so heavily that its weak joints

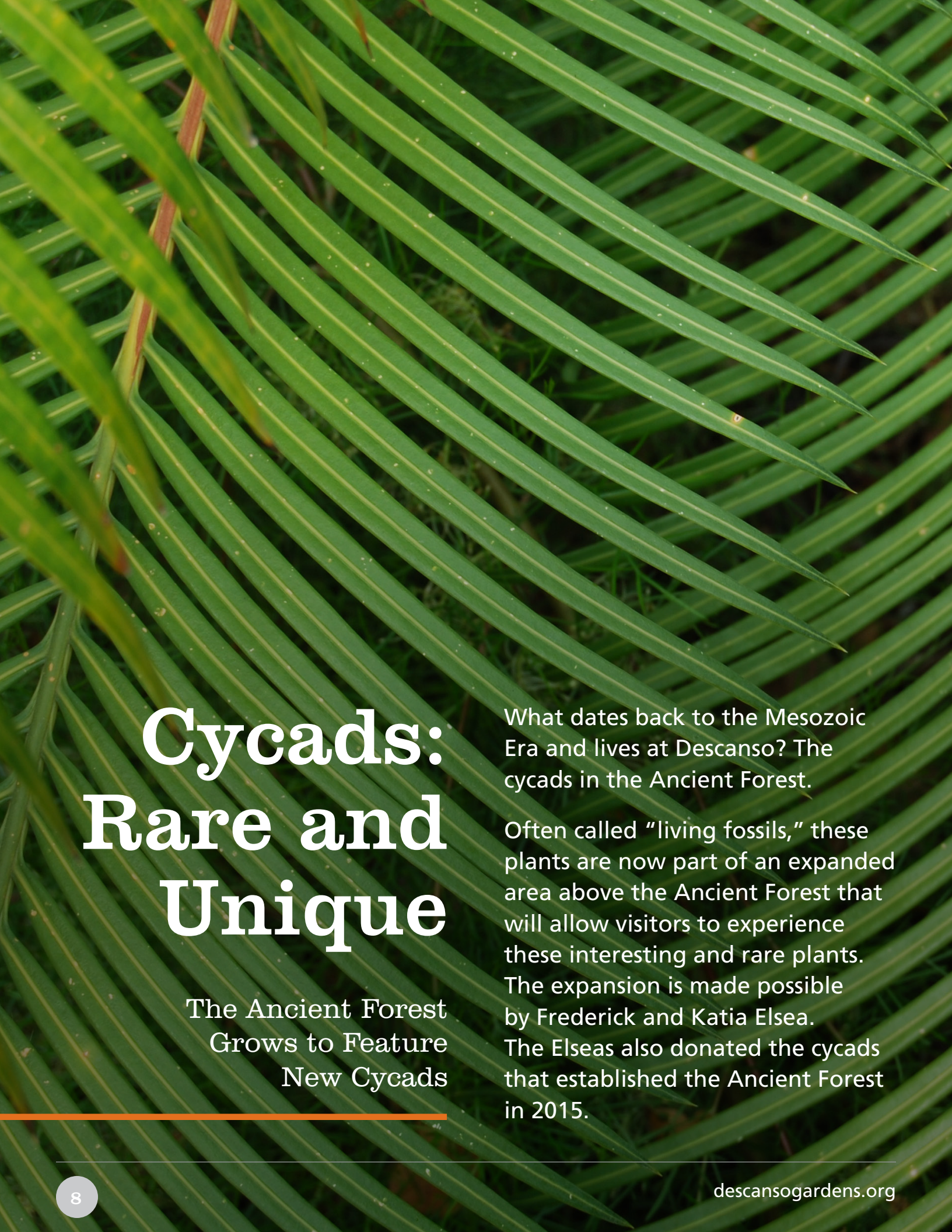


break and thus benefits from a little support. It's best to stake it early on. Soil should be fertile with compost and mulch. Like all salvias, their pungent foliage renders them unattractive to deer.

The perfect companions for 'Amistad' are *Rudbeckias* of all kinds. The composite flowers of the brown-eyed Susan contrast nicely with the spikes of the salvia and the yellow orange petals make the jewel toned purple stand out all the more. Throw in some wispy muhly grass and the picture is complete.

The friendship sage is perennial in our climate but in the display area of Descanso I always plant it as an annual. It is removed every autumn to make room for the Enchanted 'Flower Power' display during the Enchanted Forest of Light event and ultimately the winter tulip planting. 'Amistad' has no trouble surviving the winter in a pot and quickly rebounds when planted out. If you are able to keep it in one place such as George, our rose horticulturist has done, it will reach its ultimate and impressive size and spread.

'Amistad' is one of the most asked about flowers in the display gardens and deserving of every compliment.



# Cycads: Rare and Unique

The Ancient Forest  
Grows to Feature  
New Cycads

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What dates back to the Mesozoic Era and lives at Descanso? The cycads in the Ancient Forest.

Often called “living fossils,” these plants are now part of an expanded area above the Ancient Forest that will allow visitors to experience these interesting and rare plants. The expansion is made possible by Frederick and Katia Elsea. The Elseas also donated the cycads that established the Ancient Forest in 2015.



“The Ancient Forest is a perfect example of how people can help the gardens grow,” said Somer Sherwood-White, Director of Advancement. “Because of Fred and Katia’s generosity, these unique specimens will now be seen by all our visitors.”

In Descanso’s Ancient Forest, visitors first look up at the towering redwoods, but living below are the cycads. The cycads are displayed in groupings, mimicking their natural habitat in Australia, South Africa and South America. The sunlight shining through the redwood canopy acts like a spotlight that emphasizes the amazing variation in texture and color of the garden.

“The cycad collection helps Descanso interpret the ancient history of plants. They serve as a living example

of the evolution of plant life on earth and are a major component in demonstrating the appearance of a prehistoric forest,” said David Bare, Director of Horticulture and Garden Operations.

Cycads are the oldest living group of seed-producing plants in the world. They have been around for at least 250 million years – long before dinosaurs came on the scene.

Cycads have single (sometimes branched) trunks topped with feather-like leaves. This makes them look a bit like a palm tree, but they are not actually related at all. One big difference is that palms have flowers while cycads do not. Besides, the palm family is much younger and has only been around for 70-80 million years.



Cycads have separate male and female plants. The males grow a large cone on top of their trunk, which produces pollen. The females grow a cluster of finger-like stalks. At first, they grow upwards together to form a sort of cone shape. But when the nuts (or seeds) start to grow and get heavy, they droop down around the top of the trunk.

These plants have managed to survive for millions of years, so as you might expect they are tough. These plants can be broken or burnt to the ground, and often regrow. They are usually the first plant to resprout after a fire. They are also very adaptable in droughts and do fine in poor soil. Even though they are resilient, cycads are one of the most threatened plant groups on Earth. Making the collection at Descanso an even more important place to visit and enjoy.

“A significant role that Descanso plays as a botanic garden is in the protection and preservation of plants that are threatened, or endangered. One such plant is the Cycad, or more specifically, many within the Cycadales Order,” said Royal Jenkins, Plant Collections Coordinator. “Until more recently, cycads flourished as a diverse group of plants, but of today’s approximately 300 recognized species of cycads, nearly two-thirds risk extinction. Their predator? Us, primarily through habitat loss, deforestation, and poaching. A factor that indirectly contributes to their extinction though, is lack of awareness, which is where botanic gardens, such as Descanso, can intervene through education. It is truly an honor to be aiding in the preservation of these ancient wonders.”

# All About Cycads



Cycads date as far back as 252.2 million years.

More than 300 species of cycads exist to date, but scientists estimate that the true number of cycads is much larger.

Some species of cycads look like palm trees, while others look like ferns at first glance. Despite these similarities, cycads, palms and ferns are not genetically related.

Most cycads are slow growing but can survive over 2,000 years in the wild.

Cycads can survive in different habitats: tropical rainforests, deserts, swamps, sandy and rocky areas.

Cycads do not produce flowers. Male plants produce egg-shaped cones that are usually yellow to brown in colour. Female plants develop seeds on leafy structures called sporophylls.

Cycads are a source of food for many animals. Larvae of certain butterflies and ants eat secretion from the leaves, cattle feed on the leaves, while fruit bats eat the seeds.

**Descanso Gardens**

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