

# DESCANSO

Fall 2023 – Winter 2024



## The Changing Nature of Descanso

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# A Year of Changes

by Juliann Rooke, Chief Executive Officer



As we move into fall, I'm thinking about this year and it has been full of changes - some planned and some not, but all opportunities that move Descanso into the future.

I don't have to tell anyone living in SoCal that this winter was a strange one. After years of drought, we had more rainfall in a few months than we have gotten in years. The rain softened the ground, and many of our majestic oaks came down. It was heartbreaking. I was reminded of the power of nature and the ever-changing landscape of Descanso. When I see the blank spaces in the oak canopy I can't help but be sad about it.

As I write this, the wood that was recovered from the fallen trees is being milled by Angel City Lumber to be used in future projects here in the garden and in other places. It seems appropriate that the oaks that watched over this land for so long serve another purpose.

The changing oak woodland is also an opportunity to think about how climate change will affect the garden and our collections. At Descanso, the work we are doing in the Ruth Borun Nursery and Propagation Center is becoming more and more important. We are propagating lilacs and camellias and oaks.

Some changes we have been planning for. When you visit this fall, you will see new dining options. Jones Coffee Roasters, a Pasadena favorite, will set up a shop in the Courtyard. Jones seems like a wonderful fit for Descanso. We both value community and, speaking for myself, love good coffee. Also on Sept. 1, we will open The Market.

This year we are celebrating the 70th anniversary of when a group of community volunteers banded together to make sure that Descanso Gardens was preserved for future generations. It is still through community that we continue to grow and thrive. You're invited to the garden on Sept. 21 when all members and La Cañada Flintridge households can enjoy the End of Summer Celebration. There will be food, music, fun and you can also get a look at upcoming projects happening here at Descanso.

*See you in the Garden!*

Juliann Rooke



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*At Descanso Gardens, we connect people with nature and one another.*

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# After the Storm

## The Oaks Remind us that Descanso is Ever-Changing

by David Bare, Director of Horticulture

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There is no sound like a falling tree, the rush of air before it, and the thunderclap of impact. It freezes you for a moment and then you rush to find it, hoping, praying that no one was near it. That particular roulette ball has bounced a few times too many at Descanso, and I have personally stood a little too close to the wheel on several occasions.

This winter's storms provided ample unwanted opportunities to experience the particular emotional menagerie that is a falling tree in a public space.





First, there is that boom and stunned reaction, comparable only to the sound of a car crash. Then there is the terror associated with the fear of harm and damage. Once onsite there is a sort of awe at something so huge, so seemingly permanent, giving way to gravity. A sort of disbelief and shock sets in when seeing something that you have passed under every day, which you have held in reverence, lying splintered and crushed on the ground.

You become simultaneously awed at the drama of the scene and aware of your own ephemeral grasp on existence. And then the grief begins.

We lost 22 substantial trees beginning in December of 2022 and stretching into March of 2023, mostly oaks but also a California walnut and even two willows, a tree that can be as easily found growing in water as out of it. All of these losses are sad, they alter the landscape incalculably and they make familiar scenes alien. But there are no greater losses than our oaks. They fell in the Camellia Forest, in the Oak Grove, in the Japanese Garden, in the Ancient Forest, and along the slope that retreats from the Boddy House. They fell with immeasurable violence and impact or they laid down gently as if exhausted by the relentless season. Or perhaps I'm projecting.

Descanso's gardeners and horticulturists alike spent this winter in rain gear. Over the constant shush of the falling rain you could hear the swish of vinyl and Gore-Tex as they came toward you. The days were exhausting in their repetitiveness. Drains were cleared and channels dug as new rivulets would spontaneously appear in the landscape. The gallery began to take on water from the hillside. Next to it a new waterfall feature developed, but you had to jump a vigorously flowing culvert and stand on what had become a miniature island to appreciate it. In the natives, a spontaneous lake appeared, courtesy of an immense debris flow that plugged a drainage tunnel. Bridges that cross this now dry stream bed were buried under a foot of sand. In the Ancient Forest, the redwoods stood in similar pools, looking more like bald cypresses in a southern swamp than our iconic coastal behemoths.

The new nursery exhibited countless drainage flaws. Springs popped up randomly in the decomposed granite we use extensively at Descanso for paving. As the nursery topography all drains into the bio-retention garden, it too was tested to the extremes of what it was designed for. It performed to expectations but there were consequences downstream, a main path eroded out and there was a steady flow across the road.





It wasn't all bad. After years of drought, we had over 40 inches of rain this year at Descanso, almost double the average. Our two lakes filled to a capacity that none of us working here had ever seen, uniting into one continuous body of water. Though the waterfall appears to spill out of the lake, they are actually independent of one another. The falls are a recirculating water feature and the lake a stagnant body — but not this year. The lake continued to spill over the waterfall for months and to this day has not required filling.

There were other consequences in store for the lake. Its surface has been coated with a thick algae and duckweed combination, the result of all that nitrate flowing in from the surrounding area. Our plants, in general, are performing like never before, blooming more profusely, and growing more vigorously than they have in years. But there are fungal issues on a scale we haven't encountered up until now.

We had to wait a bit before we could get into the main area of tree fall. We lost six enormous oaks on a slope that falls off from the Boddy House road to a point above the Ancient Forest. Losing oaks in this area wasn't a new thing but the scale of this one was enormous. One tree came down in the morning around 9:30, impacting another and cracking it in half. Another followed in the late afternoon. Then the wind picked up and took four more overnight.

This was the future site of the canopy walk in the Master plan. It was one of Boddy's "plantation" sites and old camellias have survived in there for years. Two drainages were running on either side of this bowl-like depression and still, there were areas during the storm where the soil became like walking on a waterbed. When the trees fell, the depressions left where their root balls stood rapidly filled with water.







Descanso has been blessed with a nesting pair of great horned owls for years now. Though they seem to change their nest site every year, it is usually in the vicinity of this tree fall area. Except for the emergency safety response, we waited for these fluffy nestlings to fledge. They took their time with it, deciding Easter Sunday, the ninth of April, a day exceeding 8,000 visitors, was go time. We commenced with clean-up afterward and are still at it.

We are committed to trying to find a new life for our fallen oaks. We are working with Angel City Lumber and William Stranger, a Pasadena-based furniture craftsman, to process all this wood for us. We are looking at the potential for new tables and bars in our upcoming new restaurant. Jeff Perry with Angel City Lumber estimates

we will have over 8,000 board feet to build with. We will repurpose the logs and branches in fencing and in our new train garden project.

I am happy we will be able to make the best of a bad situation, but there is still a great loss in these magnificent trees coming down. In the transformation from tree to table there is also the conversion from being to object. It is another way to display their inherent beauty perhaps, but a loss of living, spiritual character. Why we consider these trees so reverentially has everything to do with life and time, persistence, and perseverance. None of us will reach this age or experience what these trees have over their perhaps 120 years. It makes every last remaining one all the more treasured.





# A Living Museum, Conserving Our Stories

by **Autumn Ayers**, Garden Records and Collection Manager

By this point, I must know thousands of plants. Garden guests and friends alike assume my favorite must be some obscure, unique specimen from a faraway locale. Yet whenever someone asks me, I get misty-eyed about the humble white oak (*Quercus alba*). I talk about growing up in the midst of an oak-hickory forest in Pennsylvania, where the oaks' sturdy branches and quintessential lobed leaves shaded my childhood adventures.

When asked how I got my start in horticulture, I'll share a story of tending my grandmother's beloved roses after her passing, pouring through every horticulture book she had owned at a time when I wasn't sure where to go with my career. I'll usually get a story in return of a special plant from someone's life, or a cherished memory of a plant-tending loved one. Plants are woven through the fabric of our lives, from shaping and creating our environments to nourishing and clothing our bodies. They're present in either the backdrop or as the focal point for so many precious moments, and flowers are ubiquitous at momentous occasions like births, weddings, and funerals.

Descanso is a botanical garden, a museum where the items in the collection are living plants. Instead of paintings or ancient vases, the precious pieces here are the flowers at your feet and the trees over your head. Descanso's core collections are the Camellia Collection, the Lilac Collection,

the California Native Plants Collection, the Canopy Oaks Collection, the Ancient Plants Collection, and the Display Collection. In total, we keep records of almost 13,000 plants in the garden. When people consider the role of botanic gardens, conservation is usually one of the first things that comes to mind. Botanic gardens conserve the genetics of plants for research and preservation, but they do it in a way that invites the public to enjoy what these plants have to offer.

For instance, our California Native Plants Collection preserves the character of the native oak woodland and chaparral ecosystems of Southern California, while protecting these plants for future generations and creating a refuge for wildlife. Unlike in a seed bank or an herbarium, these plants create a beautiful garden where people can sit under the shade of the oaks, inhale the scent of the native sages, and watch hummingbirds visit colorful penstemon flowers.

I may have fond memories of oaks, but they were never part of my family's food story. Here in Los Angeles, or Tovaangar, Tongva elders teach traditional acorn recipes and create new ones to pass on. Contributing to the fabric of L.A., establishments opened by more recent immigrant communities also serve their regional acorn dishes, like the acorn noodles and jellies you can find at



Korean restaurants and markets. Oaks grow natively on every continent but Australia and Antarctica, meaning these trees are featured in the memories of billions of people across the globe. Part of being a botanical garden is creating a place to honor these stories and connections between people and plants. At Descanso, you can find *Dudleya* that grow natively in California, coneflowers and sages from across North America, camellias from around Asia, bulbs from Africa, trumpet trees from South America, herbs from Europe, and *Grevillea* from Australia. You can see other ecosystems without traveling, or you can see reminders of a distant homeland.

Our Ancient Forest may look more like a dinosaur's homeland than a human's, but it houses important genetic material in the fight to protect plants from extinction. Our Cycad Collection is made up of more than 200 plants representing around 80 different species. Many of these species are designated as vulnerable, threatened, or endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. Cycads belong to an ancient order of plants that evolved millions of years ago, long before flowering plants created the world as we know it. They can take decades to grow and many face extermination in their native environments due to development and agriculture. Growing them in a protected garden can help ensure that future generations have a chance at seeing these ancient marvels.

Although traditional conservation focuses on plants as they grow in the natural world, many of the plants in our collections have human hands in their origins. First designed in 1948, the Descanso "History of the Rose" garden chronicled the human contributions throughout the time that created the modern garden rose and all its relatives. Redesigned in 1994 as the International Rosarium, the Rose Garden today pays homage to the aesthetics and horticultural contributions of cultures around the world. Although many Westerners associate roses with England and formal, clipped gardens; roses owe much more of their heritage to Asian, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean gardeners. The Descanso Rose Collection honors all these growers and the more modern work of Walter E. Lammerts. Lammerts hybridized many of his most famous roses while he worked here in the 1940s and 50s.

Dr. Lammerts also had a role in our lilac garden. Native to areas in Europe and Asia, lilacs generally require a period of cold in order to bloom. After joining the Descanso staff in 1945, Lammerts built on his previous lilac breeding work at the University of California to create plants that would be able to bloom in Southern California. When humans breed plants, they create what are called "cultivars," a

word made from combining "cultivated" and "variety." Lammerts created a heat-tolerant lilac cultivar that doesn't need a cold period to bloom and named it 'Lavender Lady.' This laid the basis for other hybridizers to develop more low-chill lilacs, collectively known in the trade today as "Descanso Lilacs." Lilac flowers have a strong scent, one that sparks memories of home for many transplants to Los Angeles. Rarely do you find an old farm property on the East Coast or in the Midwest that doesn't have at least one old lilac bush. Because of the direct route smells take to the memory and emotion-processing centers of the brain, even those with memory problems like dementia patients can have a strong reaction to lilac flowers and the memories associated with them. The lilac blooms may be a fleeting spring treat, but they never fail to draw crowds and elicit delighted sighs with their perfumed petals.

In some ways, lilacs and camellias seem like opposites: camellias are generally scentless, they bloom for several months in winter, and they maintain evergreen leaves year-round while lilacs are deciduous. Like lilacs though, Descanso's camellias help keep a cultural memory alive. The bulk of Descanso's camellia collection was established when Manchester Boddy purchased the stock of two Japanese American-owned nurseries, Mission Nursery (now San Gabriel Nursery) run by Fred and Mitoko Yoshimura, and Star Nurseries run by Francis Miyosaku "FM" Uyematsu. These nurserymen were forced to sell their plants prior to their unjust incarceration during WWII. In FM Uyematsu's case, this included many seedlings that he had bred and grown but hadn't named or introduced to the market yet, as well as plants he had imported from Japan that weren't previously available in the American nursery trade. Many of these plants were later introduced by Boddy and others affiliated with Descanso Gardens and were given names like 'Berenice Boddy', and 'Pride of Descanso.' Today, special red signs in the garden tell the story of the Uyematsu and Yoshimura camellias and reflect the names originally given to them.

The camellias in our collection offer color and beauty in the cold winter months, and help us remember and celebrate contributions to horticulture and society. Serene walking trails, bubbling water features, colorful flowers, and local wildlife — these are all reasons people make time to visit Descanso Gardens. But what sets us apart from other parks or recreation areas are our living collections. Our curatorial nature gives us a dedicated focus on storytelling through beauty, and fostering the plant-people connection. In short, as our revised mission states, "At Descanso Gardens we connect people with nature and one another."





# Birding for Everyone

by **Vanessa Pierce**, Education Programs Manager

I am not your stereotypical birdwatcher. When I first began working at botanical gardens, I was not particularly interested in birding. But after spending some time with one of the horticulturists, who was an avid birder, I discovered the hidden world of birds. He would identify all the bird calls and explain bird behaviors to me. He described it as if it were a soap opera, detailing all the drama between the birds and what their behaviors and songs actually meant. I was totally enthralled. Now I absolutely love to go on bird walks and get a sneak peek into this wonderful world above our heads.

Here at Descanso Gardens, we have great birding opportunities. We have a bird observation station located in the Lakeside Lookout where a team of dedicated volunteers spend hours engaging guests and educating them about the birds on the lake and around Descanso. The bird station has many different nests that guests can examine as well as bird identification books to look through. Additionally, we have a monthly bird walk for

our members on the fourth Sunday of every month. Our expert birders lead a group through the gardens to identify and count birds. These programs are great for new birders and experts alike, and they are a wonderful way to enjoy the gardens and meet new people.

There is no barrier to entry to our programs — you can come with no equipment or prior knowledge and still have a marvelous time. That said, if you want to invest a little, here are three basic tools that enhance the experience:

1. A pair of binoculars will allow you to get a closer look at the birds and will help you identify them.
2. Bird identification books and birding apps are great ways to learn more about the birds around Descanso and Southern California. I use Merlin Bird ID and eBird.
3. A journal or notebook to write down what you saw and where is very helpful. This can be used to track the birds you observe and research more about them afterward.





## Birds to look for at Descanso Gardens:

- **Acorn woodpeckers** are often seen and heard drilling acorns into the trees around Descanso. They live in groups of two to sixteen birds called “clans.” They work together to store acorns in tree trunks, logs, or poles called “granaries.” Each acorn is individually drilled into the hole and stored there for future communal use.
- **California quails** are usually among the chaparral and sagebrush. They rarely fly more than a few yards but are very quick runners. The males can be identified by the iconic black plume of feathers on top of their heads. In the winter, California quail live in groups of 25-75 birds called “conveys” that will work together to stay safe and find food.
- **California scrub-jays** are our smart and vocal neighbors. They are easily recognizable by their blue, white, and gray coloring. In the fall they can be seen feeding on acorns in large numbers. They inspect each

acorn closely before consuming it or caching it for later use. These sneaky birds are also known to steal acorns from other birds like the acorn woodpecker.

- **Oak titmouse** can often be found in the Oak Woodland. They are gray-brown in color and have many beautiful songs. They like to eat insects hidden under leaves or inside of oak galls but they will also eat seeds and acorns in the fall. They are cavity nesters and use hollowed-out tree trunks to build their nests.

Birdwatching is a great way to engage with nature. Try to listen and observe closely as you walk through the gardens. Be aware of all of the little rustling and scratching sounds you hear. Listen to all of the bird songs, chirps, and calls. Let your awareness expand high up into the trees and down low under bushes. I believe that birding is for everyone — all you have to do is listen and observe closely. Next time you are in the garden, keep an eye out for birds.







# You've Never Seen Descanso Like This

Get ready for a holiday season like no other as Descanso Gardens announces the return of two beloved events — Carved and Enchanted Forest of Light — both of which have new routes, new locations, and lots of surprises.

“Carved and Enchanted have become holiday traditions for so many people,” said CEO Juliann Rooke. “And while we are keeping many of our traditional light installations, we invite visitors to embark upon a truly enchanting journey filled with all-new features and enhancements.”

Mark your calendars because from October 6 to 29, Carved will light up Descanso.

The gardens will turn into a mesmerizing pumpkin wonderland featuring even more seasonal fun. As you stroll through the captivating displays, you'll be amazed by luminous jack-o'-lanterns, fallen tree sculptures, and whimsical installations, including Tom&Lien Dekyvere's glow-in-the-dark Rhizome installation in the Rose Garden Labyrinth and giant carved pumpkins under the Rose Garden Pavilion.

Don't miss the expanded Día de los Muertos ofrenda altar, providing guests with a place to meditate and remember loved ones. The pumpkin house, hay maze, and fall food offerings will all be back to round out the fun. Carved is the perfect family-friendly adventure, bringing joy and wonder to visitors of all ages.

And the magic doesn't end there. From November 19 to January 7, 2024, Descanso Gardens will transform into the breathtaking Enchanted Forest of Light, taking you on a captivating journey through stunning light displays set amidst the serene beauty of nature. This year, you can explore a new route through the Rose Garden, discovering exciting light displays that spark awe and wonder. Prepare to be amazed as the Rose Garden's Labyrinth comes alive with HYBYCOZO's 3-D geometric sculptures and a glowing field of “meadow grass” sways amidst the rose bushes. Tom Fruin's charming “stained glass” houses will create a village of their own on the Main Lawn, featuring new interactive lighting options. Plus, you can immerse yourself in a new hanging light installation under the oaks which evokes an ethereal ambiance that will leave you spellbound.



## Support the gardens and experience the magic firsthand!

Join us at the Preview Party fundraiser on Saturday, November 18, and be among the first to experience Enchanted Forest of Light before it opens to the public on November 19. Tickets are \$250 per person, and they include tasty food, refreshing drinks, and special entertainment — all of which directly benefits the Gardens. Learn more at [descansogardens.org](http://descansogardens.org).

### TICKETS

Tickets are on sale now  
Members get \$5 off each ticket  
Children under 2 are free but require a ticket  
Find out more at [descansogardens.org](http://descansogardens.org)

#### Carved

October 6 – 29 | 6 – 10pm  
Adult: Member: \$30-40 | Non-member: \$35-45  
Child (2-12): Member: \$20-25 | Non-member: \$25-30

#### Enchanted

November 19 – January 7 | 5:30 – 10pm  
Adult: Member: \$30-40 | Non-member: \$35-45  
Child (2-12): Member: \$20-25 | Non-member: \$25-30





# Eat, Drink, and Enjoy the Garden!

Join us Sept. 1 for the opening of Jones Coffee Roasters at Descanso and get a free small brewed coffee.

## *Exciting Changes at the Courtyard*

Walk into the Courtyard and the first thing you may notice is the enticing aroma of freshly brewed coffee, followed by friendly faces and a hot drink waiting for you. When you visit Jones Coffee Roasters at Descanso Gardens, Chuck Jones, co-founder of the Pasadena-based tradition, hopes you will find the same sense of discovery that you find in the garden.

This collaboration exemplifies a shared passion for fostering community connections and savoring the finest coffee. Juliann Rooke, CEO of Descanso Gardens, expressed her enthusiasm, saying, "I have, for years, wanted Jones Coffee to be our partner and I finally got my wish. I know our visitors will love strolling in the garden, coffee in hand."

With a rich heritage spanning five generations, Jones Coffee Roasters epitomizes excellence in coffee culture. Rooted in a 3,000-acre Guatemalan farm, the Jones family grows, roasts, and sells coffee beans that have earned recognition from leading specialty coffee organizations. Their commitment

to environmental sustainability and the well-being of their worker community shines through in every aromatic sip.

Descanso has also reimagined the former Café space in the Gardens' Courtyard as The Market, an epicurean haven where guests can discover a diverse range of hot and cold grab-and-go items, gourmet snacks, and an enticing assortment of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. As an irresistible bonus, The Market will offer a tantalizing selection of soft-served ice cream, perfect for satisfying cravings on warm, sunny days.

"Our mission at Descanso Gardens is to continually elevate the visitor experience, and our partnership with Jones Coffee and the launch of The Market exemplifies this commitment," continued Rooke. "We're redefining how our guests can savor a wide variety of culinary options, quickly, efficiently, and with elevated quality, ensuring a memorable and satisfying journey for all."





# Descanso Gardens Thrives Because of You

These are some of the amazing things we achieved in 2022. Descanso Gardens would not be the botanic oasis it is without the incredible support and efforts of our donors, members, volunteers, and staff.





Descanso Gardens

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