

FALL 2025/WINTER 2026

Descanso

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Our Mission

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

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Carrying the camellia legacy forward



Just days after the Eaton Fire began, I received a call from former board member Greg McLemore. He told me that Nuccio's Nursery—tucked in the foothills of Altadena off Chaney Trail—had been mostly spared. Descanso has been a longtime customer of Nuccio's; they grow and propagate some of the most beautiful camellias in the world, and they wanted us to come up and help them save some of the plants. What the fire spared would not make it without water.

Autumn Ayers (our Manager of Horticulture and Collections), and I jumped in a truck and headed up the hill. The devastation along the way was heartbreaking. Unbearable. As we drove through the evacuation area, I found myself questioning whether we should even be there. I can't recall exactly how we made it through, but when we arrived, Jim Nuccio and McLemore were waiting for us.

As the sun set, they began loading our truck with some of their most prized camellias. We took as many as we could. In the midst of tragedy, it was the most beautiful gift.

A legacy, in its simplest form, is something you leave behind for others to remember you by. If you plant a tree today, and years from now people enjoy its shade and fruit, that tree is your legacy. I think about legacy often here in the garden. What can we do to ensure that the legacy of this land is preserved and honored?

I hope we can honor the Nuccios—and all camellia growers—through our new Camellia Trail. I want their legacy to be felt every winter when the camellias bloom. I want Descanso Gardens to be part of their legacy.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Juls", which is a stylized representation of the name Juliann.

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Descanso's new Camellia Trail is a celebration of beauty and a tribute to generations of local growers.

The camellia x vernalis 'Egao', this page, and camellia japonica 'Prince Eugene Napoleon' on cover, are both plants donated to Descanso by Nuccio's Nurseries and will be on display as part of the camellia trail.



The camellia collection grows and takes shape

by Arian Noorzai,
Camellia Horiculturist

Descanso's Camellia Forest is a place of horticultural magic; an ecosystem that exists nowhere else in the world. The peculiar dichotomy of a *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak) canopy and an understory of camellia species at Descanso straddles a fine line between reality and imagination. What should have never been possible continues to impress 100 years later.

The coast live oak, a native plant of California, has adapted to dry summers, and this period of dry weather is crucial to its overall health. Conversely, camellias require a wet summer to produce noticeable blooms. Though camellias possess handsome evergreen foliage, let's be honest, we grow them

for the stunning "winter rose" that appears when most of the landscape seems asleep.

Descanso has been working on a plan to ensure the health of both the oaks and the camellias for many years, while also exploring their history. This plan was fast-tracked after the Eaton Fire led to a gift from local growers, Nuccio's Nurseries, making a new Camellia Trail a reality, and allowing the garden to honor the history of our "winter rose."

From a devastating event, a gift

Earlier this year, our surrounding community was devastated by the Eaton Fire. Though the garden was spared from the flames, 100-mile-an-hour winds wreaked havoc on the grounds. As we worked to repair the

damage and make Descanso safe for guests, CEO Juliann Rooke received a call from former board and Perennial Circle member Greg McLemore, connecting her with Nuccio's Nurseries. Rooke, McLemore, and Gardens and Collections Manager Autumn Ayers were invited to visit Tom and Jim Nuccio at their nursery, which had suffered damage and burned structures, but whose collection was largely spared. The trip resulted in a donation of some 100 rare and vital camellia cultivars from the Nuccios.

Long-time Descanso supporter and camellia lover Ed Johnson stepped up and made a donation that allowed Descanso to purchase even more plants from Nuccio's. The collection included many "mother" plants that the Nuccios had long used for propagation. In total, more than 300 plants came to Descanso. Ed's donation also allows for infrastructure updates as part of the Camellia Trail.

With this purchase, both the future of Descanso's Camellia Forest and Nuccio's nursery were significantly altered. Although we had previously aligned our collection policy to focus on more sun- and drought-tolerant,

The peculiar dichotomy of a *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak) canopy and an understory of camellia species at Descanso straddles a fine line between reality and imagination. What should have never been possible continues to impress 100 years later.



as well as fungal-resistant camellias, we now had an essentially brand-new, world-class collection of many iconic cultivars, along with a robust species collection. With these donations, the new Camellia Trail began to take shape.

A new Camellia Trail

There was always a plan for Descanso's world-class camellia collection. The camellias require a lot of water, while the oaks

do not. This was a puzzle that the horticulture team had been working on for many years. Historically, both plants were watered, which led to poor oak health. Even in the Master Plan, adopted in 2020, the garden envisioned as consolidating the camellias into a small area, making it easier to irrigate properly. It also created a place to tell the story of the camellias and the growers who propagated them.

Another event happened in 2022-2023 that changed our thinking—massive rains led to the loss of more than 20 giant oaks on the slope under the Boddy House. The camellias under those trees are now exposed to direct sunlight and

CEO Juliann Rooke, Manager of Horticulture and Collections Autumn Ayers, and former board member Greg McLemore collected plants from Nuccio's Nurseries days after the fire.



heat, which is not how they thrive. Even today, if you go to the area, you can see how the loss of oaks affects the camellias. Water had again altered the forest.

The history of watering and the storms had the horticulture staff rethinking the relationship between the oaks and camellias. How could they live in harmony? With Nuccio's gift in hand, the garden began to think about the Camellia Trail.

The first goal was to find a good place to showcase the collection. Gone was the idea of moving and consolidating the collection. Instead, the new plants would be placed in the mature camellia forest. The path between the Main Lawn and Oak Grove was chosen since it already features many mature

plants essential to our collection and is an accessible area. It is a place in the forest where the camellias can surround you. Anyone who has ever stood in the Camellia Forest during full bloom understands the beauty of the flowers that feel like they stretch from the ground to the sky.

The oaks are tall and mature in this area, but some spots still get too much sun for the camellias, so several new (more water-tolerant) trees were chosen to cast shade over sun-exposed spots. *Quercus virginiana* (southern live oak) and *Magnolia grandiflora* (southern magnolia) were selected as the new canopy replacements.

It was time to start planting. A group of passionate volunteers joined the Descanso

team of gardeners, and together we planted over 300 camellias in just six days. I've seen many fantastic horticulture projects during my 20 years working in the field. Still, I have never seen such an incredible and motivated planting of these numbers, especially considering the many roots, rocks, and pipes that lie unknown to us in the depths of the soil. Eagle Scout Griffin McLemore also brought a crew to help repair irrigation. The results were instantaneous; the forest is now full of camellias.

A story of the Descanso camellias

Camellias are not native to Southern California, but E. Manchester Boddy, a former owner of the land that is now

Left, The new Nuccio's Nurseries camellias were lined up by the Lilac Gardens until they could be planted in the new area. The camellias include camellia japonica 'Hagoromo.'

The story of camellias at Descanso is one of resilience—and now, renewal.

Descanso Gardens, wanted to cultivate and sell the flowers. For this endeavor, Southern California was hospitable in two ways: the oaks provided a perfect environment for growing, and growers in the area were camellia experts in propagating the plants.

One of those growers was Francis Miyosaku (FM) Uyematsu. Known in the horticultural circles of his time as “the Camellia King,” FM Uyematsu was a Japanese American nurseryman in Los Angeles. Immigrating to the United States in 1904, FM Uyematsu founded and ran a successful nursery business named Star Nurseries for over 30 years and had an enormous and lasting impact on the camellia trade. He created and introduced numerous camellia cultivars, as well as imported many more specialized plants from Japan.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which led to the mass incarceration of Americans of Japanese ancestry on U.S. soil during World War II. Under these tragic and unjust



circumstances, FM Uyematsu sold between 300,000 and 320,000 camellia plants to Manchester Boddy for a fraction of their value before he and his family were sent to Manzanar. The purchase of these plants (and more from the Mission Nursery run by the Yoshimura family) became the basis for Descanso Gardens’

first signature collection.

Throughout the gardens, you will see special labels marking cultivars that were either purchased from Star Nurseries or were originally developed or imported by FM Uyematsu. These red metal labels have the scientific name of the plant, including the name of the cultivar, a star for

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Star Nurseries, and a credit to Mr. Uyematsu on them. FM Uyematsu's life's work has a huge impact on the garden and the camellia world at large.

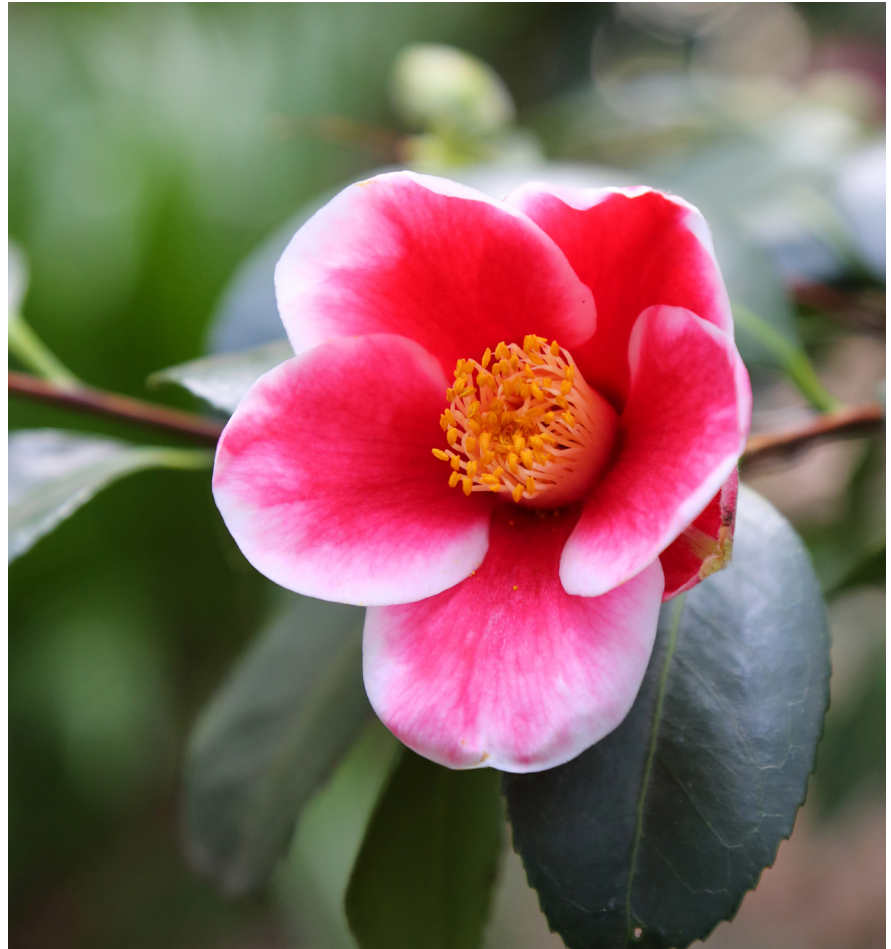
Nuccio's camellias

In January and February this year, hundreds of pots were lined up near the Lilac Garden. They contained beautiful and rare types of plants that would soon become part of our larger collection. Many were unlike any we currently have at the garden—some had huge red blooms, and others had interesting leaf shapes. Tags introduced the plants with names like "Flower Girl," "Honeymoon," and "Confucius."

Jim Nuccio said when they found that the plants had survived the fire, they knew instantly that they would make a donation to Descanso. He said he just felt "fortunate to still be here." In all, more than 300 plants were given or purchased by the garden from Nuccio's Nurseries.

Nuccio's has always been a part of Descanso's camellia collection, often selling or donating plants, but the 2025 donation and sale contributed in a lasting way to the collection.

Nuccio's Nurseries has been a staple in Altadena and in the global camellia trade since 1935. Located just up the road on Chaney Trail in Altadena, Nuccio's has supplied at least 1,300 plants to Descanso Gardens over the years. This



display highlights some of the camellia cultivars that Nuccio's Nurseries hybridized and introduced to the nursery trade.

Julius Nuccio knew that he wanted to grow camellias when he was just 11 years old. He and his brother Joe began growing camellias and azaleas in their parents' backyard in Alhambra in the early 1930s. Eventually, the family purchased the land on which the nursery currently sits in Altadena and has grown and sold plants there ever since. Julius and Joe passed the nursery on to their sons, Jude, Tom, and Jim, and today the

nursery is run by Tom and Jim Nuccio.

A true family business, many of the cultivars created at the nursery bear family names, such as "Katie" (named for Joe and Julius' mother), "Giulio" (named for their father), and "Julius" and "Joe" (named for the founders themselves by their children). Altogether, the nursery has introduced over 200 camellia cultivars and over 100 azalea cultivars to the world, several of them highly popular and award-winning.

Nuccio's has been intending to close for years. There was a

The new Camellia Trail will honor the growers whose work is showcased in the garden. To left, camellia japonica 'Tam-no-ura.'



plan to sell the land for athletic fields to a local private school, and when that fell through, the family began discussing options with land trusts. The fate of the land remains uncertain. Jim expects no fanfare for the nursery or his family when they close. Still, he is proud that his name will be part of the camellia story here at Descanso.

The bright future of our “winter rose”

Visitors can now wander the Camellia Trail. This season brings blooms never before seen in the garden—in shades of pink, red,

and white. Look for single, semi-double, and fully double flowers, with some varieties showcasing dense, overlapping petals. Interpretive signage is also being prepared to tell the story of Descanso’s camellias.

Preserving these new camellias is the next step. Fungus, rodents, old irrigation systems, overly eager feet, and intrepid camellia-climbing visitors all pose daily threats to the collection. Still, as Descanso has done before, we will treat these plants with care. The new varieties also give Descanso the chance to preserve them. In the nursery, many of the

plants will be propagated to make sure we can continue to grow and share them.

The story of camellias at Descanso is one of resilience—and now, renewal. We’re proud to carry this history forward, and even prouder to share it with you. 🌸

Autumn Ayers, Manager of Horticulture and Collections, and Jennifer Errico, Director of Communications and Membership, contributed to this story.

Celebrating a decade of ancient plants

by Autumn Ayers, Manager of Horticulture and Collections

Tucked away in the northeast corner of Descanso, redwoods flourish, tree ferns tower over visitors, and cycads hold ancient secrets. This lush and shady gem is the Ancient Forest, a place where guests can imagine what the world may have looked like millions of years before human eyes were here to see it.

Once referred to as “Jurassic Park” amongst the staff, this garden has long harbored some prehistoric specimens, but the Ancient Forest really grew into its current splendor 10 years ago, in 2015. The heart of the garden, the Cycad Collection, came from Frederick and Katia Elsea’s generous donation of their personal cycad collection, 183 plants in total. Fred has continued to steward

the collection at Descanso with subsequent donations throughout the years, bringing our total number of cycads to 265 and allowing for the development of the expanded sunny cycads area and the Cycad Extension. These new areas draw the cycads across the road and up towards the Hilltop Gardens and allow us to grow more diverse cycad species from around the world.



A special plant, but why?

So, what is a cycad, and what makes this such a valuable collection? Cycads are an ancient lineage of seed-producing plants that have been around for at least 250 million years. Evolving before Pangaea broke apart, these living fossils stand as a testament to life on Earth and the history of plant evolution. Unfortunately, perhaps as a consequence of evolving at a slower rate, cycads grow and reproduce at a relaxed pace that makes it hard for them to compete with human development, agricultural expansion, and illegal wild collecting. The IUCN Red List estimates that approximately 71% of cycad species are



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threatened with extinction in the wild. Botanical gardens have long been involved in plant conservation efforts, and protected sites like Descanso Gardens allow cycad plants to flourish away from dangers in their home environment.

However, conservation practices have shifted over the decades. It used to be a commonly held belief that just protecting plants *ex situ* (outside of their native growing area) was enough to conserve a population for the future. With the advent of genetic testing,

that thought has been turned on its head. It turns out that across many species of plants at botanical gardens around the world, many specimens of the same species are incredibly closely related. This means that any plants reproduced from botanical gardens' collections would be very inbred and might have reduced vigor and an inability to thrive if returned to the wild.

So how does this happen?

Many plants can be propagated (reproduced) from cuttings

or other vegetative material. This means that the plant is essentially being cloned rather than mixing genetics with another plant, as happens when producing seed. Cycads, like the more familiar-to-us agave or other succulents, can reproduce by pups. These pups are smaller plants that grow on the mother trunk of the original plant and can be separated when they get large enough. The process of reproducing by seed for cycads can take several years between pollination and the seed's germination, and even



after that, the seed still must grow into a mature plant, which can take several more years. For people selling cycads or sharing them between botanical institutions, it is much more convenient to grow plants from pups than from seed. This means that even more than other plants, cycad collections are in danger of having a genetic bottleneck that reduces a species' long-term viability.

So what can we do about it?

This year, Descanso participated in two projects to assist in cycad conservation. In June, we received a request for plant material through an organization called BGCI (Botanic Gardens Conservation International). The request came from Luciana Piniely, a Master's student at Northwestern University working with the Chicago Botanic Garden to conduct research at the Jeremie Fant Lab.

Piniely's research focuses on verifying the identities of East African *Encephalartos* species held in ex situ collections using DNA barcoding techniques. Our collection has three of the six species that this project is targeting and we were able to share leaf samples from six plants in our collection.

Projects like this allow researchers to know what plant genetics are held safely in collections and how much overlap there is. This also enables us to identify which wild

populations lack representation of their genetics, allowing us to conduct more effective conservation work.

A request from across the ocean

Through the same BGCI plant request system, we were contacted in May by Rob Talbert at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo Botanical Gardens. Rob had a male *Cycas panzhihuaensis* (a cycad native to subtropical China) that was forming a pollen cone and wanted to find a female match. Individual cycad plants are either male or female and produce different cones that correspond to their sex, with male plants producing pollen cones and female plants producing seed cones. Cycads evolved before flowers did, and therefore before the pollinators we usually think of like butterflies and bees. To transfer the pollen between plants, cycads mostly rely on beetles. Rob didn't have a female plant nearby to accept the pollen from the male cone, so he and the Descanso staff played the role of long-distance beetles.

After harvesting the pollen and keeping it refrigerated for a month, Rob shipped the pollen to Descanso when the cone on the female *C. panzhihuaensis* was just becoming receptive. Donning protective gear due to the toxic nature of cycad pollen, Descanso staff carefully applied the pollen to the female cone in early July. Now, it's a

waiting game to see if we were successful, as it can take a year or more for the seed to develop after pollination. Although it will take patience, work like this that focuses on diversifying genetics through breeding can be pivotal to the survival of a species.

As botanical gardens turn towards more scientifically supported and globally ethical means of conservation, Descanso is proud to leverage our collections for the greater good. The two projects we participated in this year give us a chance to do more than just show the beauty of cycads and educate people about their endangerment. They allow our collections to contribute to larger conservation goals around the world. So next time you visit the gardens, stop by and relax in the cool green shade of the redwoods and tree ferns. Admire the ancient beauty of the cycads and the role they are playing in preserving their species. Keep an eye out, you may even see a dinosaur or two lurking among the underbrush. 🌿

Left, Descanso staff took pollen sent by the Hilo Botanic Garden and applied it to our plant.

Trail cams: nature's reality show

*By Abra Richmond,
Princeton Internship in Civic Service Intern*

Have you ever wondered what goes on in the wild areas of Descanso? Over the past year, with the help of community partners, the garden has strategically placed 25 game cameras to capture glimpses of local wildlife in their habitats. The project aims to understand the distribution and occurrence of animals in the garden, providing us with a glimpse into their behavior.

Getting the perfect shot

The first step was choosing camera locations by identifying tracks and trails. This collaborative effort aimed to maximize the chances of capturing wildlife movement through the garden, as well as tracking patterns and learning new insights into our wildlife. Animal trails provided some guidance about when they traveled, but the cameras could help determine how Descanso served as a wildlife corridor or greenway through La Cañada Flintridge.



What we learn

With the help of Dr. Tony Friscia, a professor at UCLA, the thousands of photos captured are being reviewed and analyzed. So far, there has been a diversity of animals, including coyotes, bobcats, squirrels, raccoons, deer, rabbits, lizards, and many species of birds.

Each image includes valuable metadata, such as date, time, and temperature, which helps build a deeper understanding of animal behavior. For instance, bobcats are rarely seen on camera during the day, except in the early morning hours. Coyotes, on the other hand, are often seen in small groups and have been observed tracking rabbits or squirrels minutes after those animals appeared on camera.

We've also seen behavior indicating territory marking, with coyotes returning to the same spots marked by others. Animals often create trails similar to those of humans, which are then used by all wildlife to navigate their environment. As a result, on camera, we will see many different animals using the same paths as each other.

This ongoing project continues to reveal the rich, hidden ecosystem that surrounds us, reminding us just how much life is unfolding right outside our view. Using pictures, we aim to reveal the secret world of these animals. 🌈



Trail cameras in the garden capture many animals like the mule deer, left, and coyote, rabbit and bobcat.

In the Garden

Holiday shows return

Carved and Enchanted Forest of Light are back.

Wander through a trail filled with elaborate pumpkins, massive illuminated gourds, and vibrant light displays during Carved, Descanso Gardens' family-friendly Halloween experience. Carved runs 6pm–10pm, October 3–30.

Enchanted Forest of Light transforms the gardens into a nighttime wonderland with dynamic, interactive light installations. Highlights include the beloved stained-glass cottages by Tom Fruin, dazzling sculptures by HYBYCOZO, the Flower Power experience along the Promenade, and the luminescent Ancient Forest. Enchanted runs 5:30pm–10pm November 16, 2025 – January 4, 2026 (Closed Nov. 17, Nov. 27, Dec. 24–25).

Farmhouse at Descanso Gardens will also be open for special dining during both events. Get your tickets and reservations at descansogardens.org.



New at the Train Station



The miniatures at Descanso Railroad have been updated to “Agriculture Around the World,” a display to celebrate the diverse ways people grow food. The miniatures, including places from the terraced hills of Peru to the cranberry bogs of New Jersey, are impressive, but so are the plants. Display Horticulturist Taylor Lopez has a special treat in store for visitors to Descanso Gardens.

Taylor has planted the garden at Descanso Railroad that reflects each area. Look for rhododendron near the Nepal installation. It’s the national flower. There is kangaroo paw at the Australia exhibition, and junipers and olives near the Spanish area.

Enjoy the Pumpkin Forest, left, at Carved. Above, a close up of a llama at the new Railroad installation.

DONOR PROFILE

Rooted in love

Claudia and Doug Forbes grew up beneath the shade of Descanso's trees—and decades later, their hearts are still firmly planted in its soil.

A Childhood Among the Camellias

For Claudia, Descanso was a magical part of growing up. School field trips, Blue Bird troop activities, and tree-planting projects are among her fondest memories. Even today, as she walks the shaded paths, she sometimes wonders if one of the towering trees is one she planted long ago.

Doug's memories are equally fond. His mother, artist Louise Forbes, often exhibited her work at the Boddy House. Doug remembers helping her set up shows and then dashing off to explore the grounds, the garden becoming a playground.

Nurturing the Garden for Future Generations

Today, Claudia and Doug are not only devoted admirers of Descanso Gardens — they are champions of its future. As members of Perennial Circle, our high-level membership group, and as volunteers, they have committed themselves to ensuring Descanso thrives.

"I love this place," Claudia says simply. "It's my favorite place to be after home."

They attend classes and events, walk the grounds frequently, and share their love of Descanso with friends and neighbors. For them, giving back to the garden is deeply personal.

"When you give back to a place, you get back so much more," Doug reflects.

A Lasting Legacy

Through their generosity and spirit, Claudia and Doug Forbes remind us that Descanso is more than just a garden — it's a living, breathing part of our community's story. They hope that others will fall in love with it too and join in preserving its beauty for years to come.

For more information about supporting Descanso Gardens, please visit descansogardens.org.



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