



Impact Report 2024

Our Mission

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



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Gardens Foundation

FROM OUR CEO, JULIANN ROOKE

I love how Descanso always has a new story to tell. We opened the Ruth Borun Nursery and Propagation Center in 2022, marking the completion of one of the first Master Plan projects. We knew the nursery would play a pivotal role in garden operations.

The importance of the nursery is evident in the story of our lilacs. The International Lilac Society informed Descanso that some of the lilacs in our garden may be the only varieties of their kind in the world. Because of the new

nursery, not only can we propagate these rare beauties, but we can also share them with other gardens. It is one example of how the projects in our Master Plan are game-changing for Descanso.



Campaigning for our future

The nursery is just one of the projects in the Master Plan; there are many more that will take us through the next ten years. To achieve this, we're excited to create spaces, programs, and infrastructure that will support our growing community while protecting our collections, ensuring wise water use, and preserving Descanso for future visitors. To help make this happen, supporters have already stepped up and contributed to the Campaign for Descanso Gardens.

It's because of you

We are so thankful to all of you who are on this journey with us. It is because of you that we accomplished so many wonderful things in 2024, and we will continue to do so. Every day, I am grateful to be part of a garden where volunteers, donors, and visitors find the same joy that I do. Together, we will ensure that Descanso remains here for generations to come.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juls".

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Master Plan projects are paying off

The news was surprising. The International Lilac Society discovered that Descanso had lilacs that may not be found anywhere else in the world. The garden has always been home to many special plants, but this came as a revelation. How does a garden protect and preserve lilacs that may be the last of their kind?

Descanso Gardens is not just a place of beauty. It is a symbol of Southern California's

distinctive landscape. It represents a delicate balance between curated horticulture and the untamed wilds of nature. For years, the garden balanced visitation with stewardship, and now faces new obstacles with a warming climate and water challenges.

These pressures prompted the leadership to make an important decision: Plan for the next 15 years with a vision that addresses both immediate concerns and long-term sustainability. The Master Plan for Descanso Gardens was approved in 2020, transforming challenges into solutions.

A place to grow

One of the first projects completed from the Master Plan is the Ruth Borun Nursery and Propagation Center. The nursery, which opened in 2022, spans 25,000 square feet and features greenhouses measuring 6,000 square feet.

On a recent day, Frank Obregon, Nursery Horticulturist, and Taylor Lopez, the Ruth Borun Horticultural Intern, were at the nursery tending to the lilacs. There are hundreds of small pots containing lilacs all over the area, each marked with a name and



Frank Obregon, Nursery Horticulturist

date. Obregon's work will make sure the lilacs are not lost. It is his mission to ensure that they are not only propagated but also shared with other gardens.

At the new nursery, the horticulture team has something they've never had before, space. The land—with its greenhouses, shade areas, and sunny glen—allows them to care for thousands of plants.

Along with the lilacs, the nursery is a place to propagate and care for Descanso's camellia collection, grow oak saplings, and nurture California native plants. The work at the nursery has also produced hundreds of milkweed saplings that are given to visitors for their gardens.



A place for fun

While the collections are the heart of Descanso, it is also a place for families to connect and have a great time. The electric train rides have always been a crowd favorite, but the garden has taken things to the next level with the addition of the Descanso Railroad.

Located near Center Circle, the railroad includes a new station and whimsical model trains. What makes this railroad truly special is its connection to the natural world. Twice a year, we give it a new look with miniatures that are built using the very materials of the garden—twigs, bark, leaves, acorns, and pebbles. The themes range from the historical “Great Train Stations of America” to the quirky “Road Trip Across America.” The railroad is brought to life by Applied Imagination, renowned for its intricate botanical models and iconic G scale trains.

Opened in July of 2024, the railroad is already a hit with visitors and has been incorporated into the garden’s Carved and Enchanted events.

The Descanso Railroad and Ruth Borun Nursery and Propagation Center are just two of the exciting projects we have completed in the Master Plan.

Investing in the next generation

This year, thanks to the generosity of our supporters, Descanso welcomed two interns.



Taylor was the first Ruth Borun Horticultural Intern, made possible by funding from the Anna and Harry Borun Foundation. She worked in the nursery named after Ruth Borun, a lifelong lover of plants, propagation, and education. Taylor spent six months learning how the gardens preserve and care for their collections.

“Participating in this internship has been nothing short of wonderful, and in some ways, life-altering,” Taylor wrote. “This has all been made possible through Ruth Borun’s legacy...I intend to use my new knowledge to honor Ruth. The beauty will always be for her.”

Collin Joe spent the summer working in the Sturt Haaga Gallery and with the program staff. As part of a summer internship for local students, generously funded by Brad and Vicki Schwartz, Collin worked on the *Hwajodo* exhibition and on designing materials such as glossaries, artist catalogs, and volunteer resources. He also participated in exhibit-related conferences, providing artistic insights for future installations.

“My experience at Descanso Gardens gave me my first look into guest services, communication between facilities, and most importantly, time management skills that I continue to apply in every job I take on,” he said.

A welcoming garden

At Descanso, we are committed to making the gardens accessible to everyone. Through the philanthropy of our generous donors and supporters, we are able to offer free admission and programs, making it possible for more visitors to experience a meaningful connection to nature.

In 2024, we welcomed 57,799 guests with free admission, including EBT cardholders, students, educators, military

personnel, and members of the public during our monthly Free Tuesdays. During extended daylight hours, we stayed open until 7pm so more people could visit after their workday.

All buildings and many paths are accessible to visitors who require physical accommodation. Wheelchairs are available for loan, and a tram is available for gallery visits. Our Master Plan envisions a garden with more ADA-accessible paths and walkways.

57,799
Free admissions

41,503
Free Tuesday guests

12,963
EBT cardholders

12,372
Field trip participants



Fostering a love of nature

Our free school programs provided children with a sense of wonder, discovery, and off-trail exploration. They helped instill an appreciation of our natural world in our youngest visitors.

Free field trips

The gardens hosted 12,372 students and adults on field trips, many of whom were from Title 1 schools. To further support the hands-on learning students experience during their visit, our education department offered pre- and post-visit lesson plans, along with expanded resources for both docent-led and self-guided field trips.

Transportation costs were a barrier for some schools to participate in field trips. To help overcome this challenge, we worked with funders to support busing and transportation expenses in the future.

In addition to field trips, we hosted four free days for homeschoolers, welcoming 1,677 children and their



instructors. We provided activity guides and educational resources, and allowed participants to explore nature.

Art and nature

My Masterpieces: Discovering Art in My Community, a collaboration

between Pasadena Unified School District, the Pasadena Educational Foundation, and local cultural institutions, provides arts learning to students in nearby communities. As part of this initiative, Descanso Gardens offered a second-grade program that combined nature exploration with artmaking, helping students develop creativity, visual literacy, and observational skills. In 2024, 451 students participated in this program.

Teachers count on our field trips as a valuable resource to enrich classroom instruction.

Connecting with nature

Member and donor support allowed us to offer a wide variety of events, workshops, and classes designed to connect people with nature and one another.

Throughout the year, the horticulture staff led bloom tours, nature walks, and demonstrations to give visitors more insight into our plant collections and how we take care of them.

The natural backdrop of the gardens served as inspiration for several art classes and poetry writing workshops.

Guests come to Descanso for the health and wellness that spending time in nature provides. There were numerous opportunities to participate in wellness classes, including yoga, sound baths, and guided nature meditations.

We had monthly story times, crafts, and other age-appropriate activities that introduced our youngest visitors to the wonder of nature.

Our Summer Music and Dance series celebrated the rich history and traditions of several different cultures. With the help of Pacific Opera Project, we hosted live opera on the Main Lawn.

Guests were invited to six Cultivate events in the summer where they enjoyed music, dancing, and engaging experiences in nature.

We thanked our members for their support at two garden-wide exclusive celebrations.

Our signature events, Carved and Enchanted Forest of Light, continued to delight guests and provide the gardens with a valuable source of revenue.

153

Hands-on workshops

132

Wellness classes

42

Little Explorers & Little Owls activity sessions

15

Guided bird walks



Art in the gardens

At the Sturt Haaga Gallery, we're dedicated to making art and nature accessible and welcoming to everyone. To support this commitment, we provided free garden admission during the openings of all our exhibitions, and we do not charge extra to visit the art gallery.

In 2024, we presented four art exhibitions. To enhance the visitor experience, we offered curator tours, artists' workshops and discussions, demonstrations, and other hands-on activities.

Exhibitions in the gardens were generously supported by the following organizations and individuals:

Accelerated Resilience L.A.
Heather Sturt Haaga
and Paul Haaga, Jr.
Korean Cultural Center
LA County Department of
Arts and Culture
Pasadena Art Alliance
Perenchio Foundation



Days of Reverie

October 25, 2024–
January 26, 2025

Days of Reverie showcased new artworks by four Los Angeles-based artists inspired by the beauty of Descanso Gardens.



Inspired by Edo

July 6–28, 2024

Inspired by Edo featured the drawings and paintings of the 50 finalists, all students in grades 1–12, in the Inspired by Edo 2024 National Art Competition.



HWAJODO: Flowers and Birds in Korean American Art

June 27–September 29, 2024

HWAJODO explored the themes of nature in traditional and contemporary Korean art with artworks by well-known Korean and Korean American artists.



Trees Talk

March 16–June 2, 2024

Focusing on Descanso Gardens' magnificent coast live oaks, *Trees Talk* explored the hidden network that allows trees to communicate with one another.

BY THE NUMBERS



Member households

29,159



Milkweeds given out

1,015



Mature oaks in the garden

1,437



Carved guests

71,597



Size of the plant nursery in square feet

25,000



Opportunities to take a wellness class

132

489 Volunteers completed

17,521 Hours of service

Hay bales
at Carved

1,000+

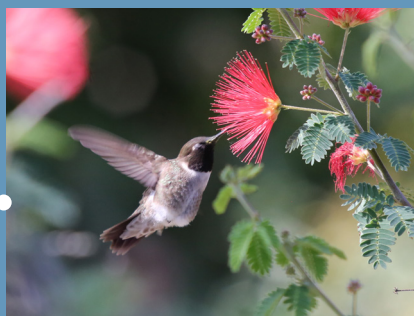


Admissions

957,141

Bird species
spotted

195



New miniature railroad

1

Guests at
Enchanted

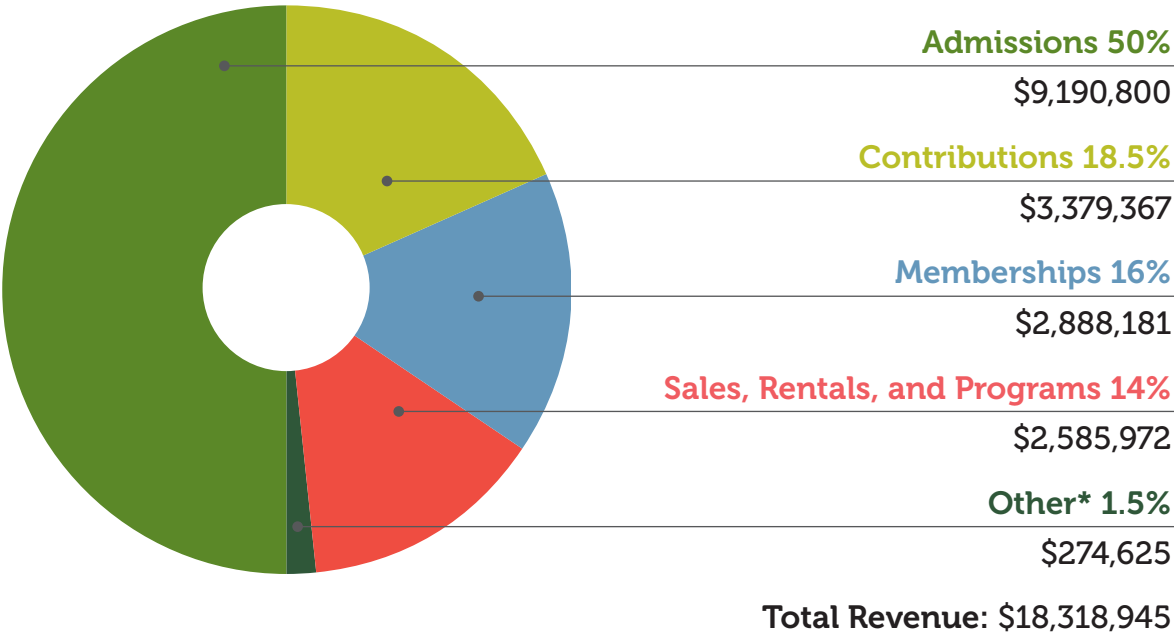
120,378



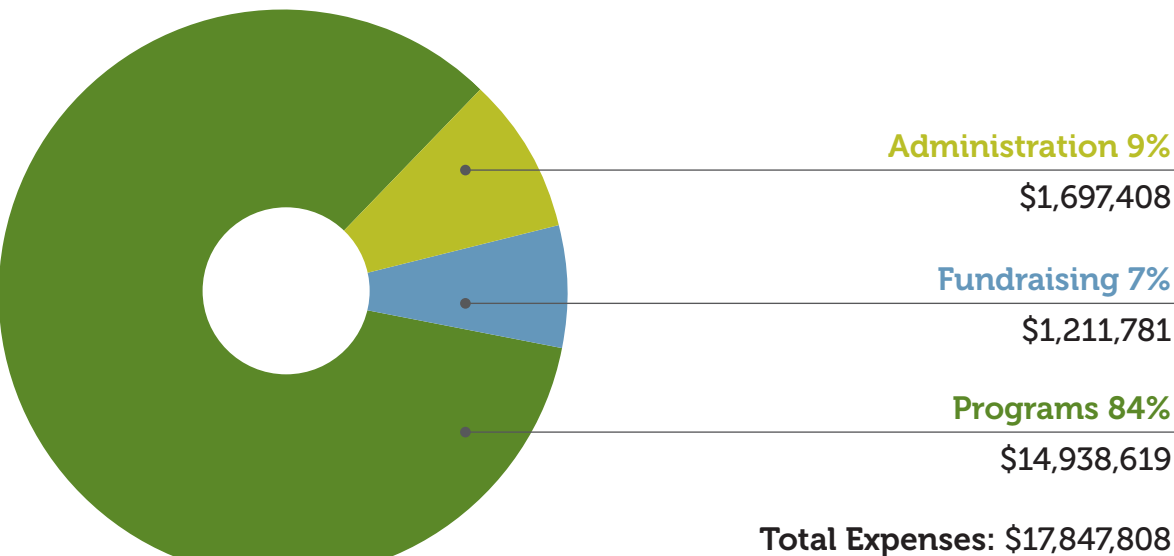
FINANCIALS

For the complete 2024 audited financial report, visit descansogardens.org.

Revenue



Expenses



*Includes management fee from LA County.

LEADERSHIP

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Director of Exhibitions

Jennifer Errico
Director of Communications

Cristeen Martinez
Director of Exhibits and Engagement

Lina Swislocki
Director of Education and Public Programs

The future of the Gardens

At Descanso, our mission is to connect people with nature and one another. This vision is only possible thanks to the generosity of our members, supporters, and friends who help create a lasting legacy of connection and conservation.

Each year, more people are drawn to the beauty, tranquility, and sense of belonging Descanso offers. By the end of 2025, we expect to welcome more than one million visitors per year—double our attendance from just a few years ago.

To ensure this growth is sustainable, expand access to green spaces, and care for the Gardens for future generations, we are bringing to life the vision outlined in our comprehensive Master Plan. For more information, please visit the “About” tab at descansogardens.org.

The Campaign for Descanso

To make the Master Plan a reality, we have been raising funds to support the Campaign for Descanso. As we continue to fundraise, the Campaign for Descanso will be an invitation for our members, supporters, and friends to invest in our future. Together we will complete transformational projects that will enhance our facilities, expand access, deepen educational and cultural programming, and preserve our important collections and the beauty of the gardens.

Learn more at descansogardens.org or contact us at development@descansogardens.org.

The Projects: Phase 1 of the Master Plan

Thanks to the generous support of our donors and grant funders, we’ve already completed several major projects in Phase 1 and have several more starting in the near future.



Membrane Bio-Reactor

Completed in 2020

The membrane bio-reactor is a critical source of water for Descanso. It partially replaced the gardens' septic system by making the wastewater suitable for irrigation and reducing the need to purchase water. It currently processes about 8,000 gallons daily which will increase to approximately 30,000 gallons per day once the Master Plan is completed.



Ruth Borun Nursery and Propagation Center

Completed in 2022

The Ruth Borun Nursery and Propagation Center has been a game changer. We are now able to efficiently propagate the treasures of the gardens and preserve the genetic material of our camellias, lilacs, rare California-native plants, and oaks. It also supports our efforts to breed drought-tolerant and heat-tolerant plant varieties.



CAMPAIGN FOR DESCANSO GARDENS



Descanso Railroad

Completed in 2024

This new garden space gives guests of all ages a dedicated place to board the beloved ride-on train and provides a more engaging train experience. The project includes a new electric ride-on train, loading platform, and multi-level miniature train display.



The Market & Farmhouse at Descanso Gardens

Completed in 2025

With the increase in visitorship, we had to rethink our guest amenities. The Market, opened in 2023, offers grab-and-go hot and cold food. Farmhouse offers a fine dining experience, with a menu designed by farm-to-table pioneer Chef Rich Mead. The interior features an indoor/outdoor bar and tables constructed from Descanso's coast live oaks that fell during the rainstorms of 2023.

Camellia Strolling Garden

Ongoing

A cornerstone of the garden's rich horticultural history, the camellias will be organized to showcase their significance and honor those who have cultivated them. A dedicated trail will guide visitors through the collection, featuring educational and interpretive elements that highlight the cultural, botanical, and historical importance of these iconic blooms.



Stormwater Capture

Construction to begin in 2025-26

This innovative project will reduce Descanso's purchased water use by 50% by capturing water from the Winery Creek Channel and storing it in a 1.5-million-gallon underground cistern for irrigation. The cistern will also provide vital fire suppression resources for both the gardens and the surrounding community.



CAMPAIGN FOR DESCANSO GARDENS



Lake Restoration

Construction to begin 2025-26

Our lake is one of the most prominent and important water features in the gardens. It is also an important investment priority in the Campaign for Descanso. This project will restore the lake and its wildlife habitat, improve visitor access to it, and ensure that Descanso demonstrates excellent wetland preservation and water management for decades to come. In addition, the lake will serve as a critical fire suppression resource, providing an additional 1.5 million gallons of water to help protect the gardens and the surrounding communities.



Nature Discovery Garden

Construction to begin 2025-26

The 3-acre Nature Discovery Garden—equal parts discovery, play, and education—will foster exploration in nature. It includes water play, quiet contemplation, climbing features, a sensory garden with a learning pavilion, and a new restroom.

Bringing the vision to life

Phase 1 of our Master Plan represents a bold investment in Descanso Gardens' future. With a total goal of \$65 million, this phase is being

funded through a diverse mix of public-private partnerships including government funds, corporate and foundation support, and individual philanthropic investment.

\$36.4M Funds raised, 56%

\$28.6M Funds left to raise

Donor Support

We are deeply grateful for the generous donations from our Phase 1 donors and grant funders.

Marilyn Allen
American Endowment Foundation
Anna and Harry Borun Foundation
Milene and Nazo Apanian
Stephanie Arakaki
Richard and Erin Atwater
Teresa Baldonado
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Catherine Biondi
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Johanna and Robert Budman
Maureen Burch and Morley Male
California Community Foundation
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Sandra Mays and John Marshall
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Donald Voss
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Clarissa and Bradford Weirick Jennifer
and Kurt Weissmuller Frances
Westbrook
Wildlife Conservation Board Carolyn
Young and Gary Oberholtz *And those
who wish to remain anonymous*

This list reflects gifts received through July, 2025.

SUPPORTERS

Thank you for your tremendous support

Annual giving in the form of memberships, donations, grants, sponsorships, and other contributions is vital for our mission and ensures the gardens' sustainability for the future.

\$500,000+

County of Los Angeles Department of
Public Works
State of California Department of Parks
and Recreation

\$100,000+

The Ahmanson Foundation
Gary Olson
Perenchio Foundation
And those who wish to remain anonymous

\$50,000+

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Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund
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Margaret Leong and Michael Checca
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Blythe Haaga Parker and Tyler Parker
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 Peter Jensen and Mary Ann McGovern
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Karen and Robert Wicke
Gary and Evangeline Wong
Anita Yagjian
Traci Young
Mike and Alice Zrodlo
And those who wish to remain anonymous

\$500+

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Luiza Andakyan
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