

### A Trip to Lotusland

I visited Santa Barbara, California this September for my son's wedding. While planning the trip, I remembered reading about a unique garden in Santa Barbara called Lotusland and decided this would be a perfect getaway for a few hours.

Lotusland is a thirty-seven-acre estate located in one of Santa Barbara's most posh neighborhoods. The estate was purchased and named by the Polish opera singer Madame Ganna Walska in 1941 and she substantially added to the estate's landscape. Before her death in 1984, she made financial arrangements for the estate to be maintained and it subsequently became a nonprofit educational institution.

Lotusland is a horticultural dream world, with exotic trees, rare cycads, and large collections of cacti, euphorbias, succulents, aloes, and yes, a water garden planted with lotus. The number of unusual plants that can be viewed here is astonishing. Some of the rarest cycads on earth are found at Lotusland. Another real treat was to see several *Araucaria bidwillii* 'Bunya-Bunya' trees.

The estate is planted in sections with each type of plant relegated to an area. Therefore, all the cacti are in one place, the bromeliads in another, and the epiphyllums in yet another. While this makes for a great specimen display (and I'm sure easier maintenance), it does not produce a soothing landscape. In many gardens, I often find a few areas where I would be content to curl up on a bench and contemplate life for an hour. I never had that feeling at Lotusland. Your senses are completely overwhelmed by the sheer number of interesting plants. A friend who was along on the tour commented that the gardens "had no soul" and I would have to agree. However, if the goal for this estate was to establish the most complete collection of rare plants possible, then that goal was achieved.

The only disappointment I found was in an area called the "Parterre", which is right behind the main house. Although the elongated fountain built into the walkway was intriguing, I thought the rose garden was a little under par, given the nature of all the other plantings on the estate. But then, I hail from the northwest, and we know how to do roses better than anyone.

Overall, I found Lotusland well worth the admission price. The estate is very well maintained – I don't think I saw a



Three specimens of *Encephalartos woodii* in the cycad garden. This is a rare cycad, now extinct in the wild.



These bromelias brighten up a shaded spot.

single weed on the entire tour. It is clear they go to great lengths to nurture and maintain the plants. The staff was friendly and went out of their way to find answers to the most arcane horticultural questions. Anyone with an interest in horticulture would find Lotusland fascinating.

## If You Go

Lotusland is located in the city of Santa Barbara in southern California. All visitors must have advance reservations. Since this is in a residential area, the city limits the number of visitors. During their busiest times of the year, a reservation several months in advance may be necessary. Therefore, I would recommend planning your trip well in advance. For reservations or information, call 805-969-9990, Monday–Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, or visit [Lotusland](#) on the web.



A cycad with three cones



Huge cacti, some in bloom, decorate the front of the house.



Melon cactus, *Melocactus oreas*, from South America.



Whimsical statues make sure the 'Theatre' area is never lonely.



A ghostly view of the cactus garden



A very graceful weeping bamboo