

## GARDENING

# Ventura Botanical Gardens will grow on you

Considering its 109-acre expanse, it does not really make sense to classify the Ventura Botanical Gardens as a hidden treasure. Located behind Ventura City Hall, it is hardly off the beaten path. Yet not enough people, especially gardening people, know about this unique horticultural project, and so it seems to be



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somewhat of a secret, although I do not think it will remain that way much longer.

I call the Ventura Botanical Gardens a project because it is still very much at the early stages of development. Although founded in 2005, most of the plants burned to the ground in the devastating Thomas fire of 2017, yet considerable new planting, trail building and retaining wall construction have been completed since then.

What stands out when you visit the Ventura Botanical Gardens is their meticulous maintenance. In all 109 acres, I did not spot a single weed, and barely a dead leaf could be seen among the flora on display. This is a credit to Joseph Cahill, the gardens' executive director; his hard-working staff; and crews of volunteers. I was fortunate to be led through the gardens by Barbara Brown, who has led the gardens' development since their inception. The gardens are at 567 S. Poli St. and are open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Admission is \$7 for adults and free from those under 18.

The master plan of the gardens incorporates plants indigenous to the five places on earth where what is known as a Mediterranean climate prevails. This climate is characterized by winter rain and long, hot and arid summers and includes areas that border the Mediterranean sea (in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa), southwestern Australia, California, South Africa and Chile.

The Mediterranean climate domains that have received the most attention at the Ventura Botanical Gardens are South Africa and Chile. One South African garden is devoted exclusively to aloes, shrubby specimens of which are resplendent at this moment with grandiose wands of flaming red flowers. Tree aloes (*Aloidendron barberae*) have been liber-



A section of Ventura Botanical Gardens is devoted to aloes.



This Chilean wine palm was blackened by the Thomas fire.

ally planted among them. The other South African garden, representing those incomparable *Fynbos* (coastal South African) species, has a number of robust proteas and some leucadendrons whose varietal name of Burgundy Sunset suggests the color of their leaves.

Most of my attention was taken up by the Chilean plants on display, and for good reason. In the words of the website at [venturabotanicalgardens.com](http://venturabotanicalgardens.com): "When complete, it will be the largest Chilean Garden in the world outside of Chile." My guide paused at the Chilean soap bark tree to extol its role in the development of the COVID-19 vaccine. The soap bark tree (*Quillaja saponaria*) gets its name from the chemical compounds under its bark that produce a cleansing soap. However, these compounds can also enhance the efficacy of vaccines. Their adjuvant quality is expressed in boosting the immune response of cells to a virus, for example, by increasing cellular antibody production. Soap bark adjuvant has long been an ingredient in the vaccine formula for shingles and is being incorporated into the coronavirus vaccine as well.

It is one of the most precious substances on earth, as 1 gram of powdered soap bark adjuvant is worth more than \$100,000.

## TIP OF THE WEEK

When thinking of crepe myrtle trees, first you think of their brilliant midsummer eruptions of crepe-textured flowers in pink, purple, red or white, and then you think of their smooth, exfoliating bark that appears in a variety of colors, from cream to cinnamon, and is especially appreciated in winter when all leaves from this deciduous species have disappeared. Yet there is another crepe myrtle feature visible this time of year that truly makes it an ornamental tree for all seasons, and I am talking about its fall leaf color. In truth, not all crepe myrtle foliage has the same luminescent gold, red or burgundy glow, so you really need to pick out your tree in the autumn season to ascertain the color change its leaves will annually display when days shorten and temperatures cool.



A crepe myrtle in its full fall color.



Soap bark trees provide an important vaccine adjuvant.



Rock purslane (*Cistanthe grandiflora*) offers vivid blossoms.

handsome columnar evergreen with flawless foliage that is impervious to pests and suitable as a hedge. Starry, greenish-white flowers in late spring attract all manner of beneficial insects and are followed by leathery fruit. The only caveat would be not to chew or ingest any parts of the tree due to their toxicity.

The other tree of note in this section of the gardens is the Chilean wine palm (*Jubaea chilensis*). This species is in danger of extinction because of the libation made from its sap, which is extracted by felling the trees and chopping off their canopies, which allows the sap to flow out freely. Although the Chilean wine palm is extremely hardy and grows as far north as San Francisco and Sacramento, it is not widely planted for two reasons: It grows more slowly and is much more expensive than other palms.

The wine palm has a peculiar habit of growth whereby its trunk reaches a significant diameter when the tree is only a few years old. Although scaly at first, the bark of the wine palm ultimately becomes silky smooth and

turns a handsome gray. A mature wine palm has an elegance that is unmatched and is the kind of heirloom tree your grandchildren and theirs will appreciate, as its lifespan exceeds several hundred years. It will eventually reach a height of 60 feet or more.

The fruit of the wine palm is edible and has the taste of coconuts, but you will have to wait until the tree is 50 years old before it produces any. Unlike date palms, wine palms are monoecious, meaning both male and female flowers are produced on the same tree.

Both soap bark and wine palm trees are available through San Marcos Growers. Access [sanmarcosgrowers.com](http://sanmarcosgrowers.com) to find a retail nursery near you that carries their plants.

One of the most popular ground covers in recent years is heavily planted at the gardens, and I can only imagine what a sight it is to see when its magenta-pink flowers are in full bloom. It's a succulent known as rock purslane (*Cistanthe grandiflora* or *Calandrina spectabilis*) and is an excellent candidate for waterless parkway strips. Although more lush when regularly watered, rock purslane will grow just fine with a single monthly soaking.

*Skytanthus acutus* is yet another uncommonly beautiful Chilean species. It's a member of the dogbane family and you will recognize the shape of its pinwheel yellow flowers in popular dogbane relatives such as vinca, oleander, star jasmine and Natal plum (*Carissa* species).

There is a small nursery you may not know about that has a nice collection of some exotic succulents, unusual annuals and precocious perennials at reasonable prices. Nelson's Nursery, at 23130 Sherman Way in Canoga Park, has a friendly and knowledgeable staff as well. It is open 9 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. There I found and brought home a purple Night Sky petunia speckled in white, a coleus with light green foliage infused with dark violet markings, and a fire engine red florist's kalanchoe (*Kalanchoe blossfeldiana*) whose flowers resemble tiny roses.

Please send questions, comments, and photos to [joshua@perfectplants.com](mailto:joshua@perfectplants.com). For more information about area plants and gardens, go to [Joshua Siskin's website](http://JoshuaSiskin's website), [thesmartergardener.com](http://thesmartergardener.com).

**EDITOR'S NOTE** » Jack Christensen is on a break from his gardening tips column due to health concerns, and we do not have a timeline for his return. If you have a note you'd like to send his way, please email Jack at [Bedstechristensen6@gmail.com](mailto:Bedstechristensen6@gmail.com).