History of the Conservatory of Flowers

The mission of the Conservatory of Flowers is to connect people and plants in a place of exceptional beauty.

The Conservatory of Flowers has captivated guests for more than a century. This gem of Victorian architecture has a long and storied history, and is the oldest public wood-and-glass conservatory in North America. As a city, state and national historic landmark, the Conservatory remains one of the most photographed and beloved attractions in San Francisco.

A GEM FOR ALL
Conservatories were fairly common among North American aristocrats in the 19th Century. Wealthy citizens erected greenhouses on their estates and created glass rooms in their urban mansions. Tropical plants were brought to California from around the world by explorers and botanists. Some were even hired by collectors to stock their greenhouses.

In the mid-19th century, James Lick, a wealthy businessman and philanthropist, ordered the greenhouse for his Santa Clara estate. Unfortunately, Lick died before it was erected, and the parts remained in crates, unused for decades. The kit was put up for sale by Lick’s trustees in 1877, and purchased by a group of prominent San Franciscans who offered it to the City. The civic-minded group of donors included Leland Stanford, founder of Stanford University and Governor and Senator of California, and Charles Crocker, the industrialist responsible for much of the railroad system in the West.

Conflicting sources state that the conservatory’s pieces were created alternately in France, England, or Ireland, but no documentation exists to support any of these claims, and it remains unclear whether the components were shipped from Europe or manufactured in California. Significant use of old-growth redwood and other native trees in the building’s infrastructure supports the theory that some sections of it were constructed on the West Coast. Some say a portion of the original materials went down with their ship in a storm. We may never know.
The Conservatory was an instant sensation when it opened in 1879 and quickly became the most visited location in the park. The original configuration of the interior spaces included a fountain in the entryway and another in the Palm Room, under the dome. The east wing featured the Orchid House and an aquatic plant gallery with a large pond. In the west wing, the conservatory displayed flowering and ornamental foliage in one gallery and hardwooded plants, like azaleas, in the other.

DESTRUCTION & RECONSTRUCTION
Since its opening, the building has seen more than its share of accidents and natural disasters. This photo from 1883 shows the damage done to the dome by a boiler explosion. Charles Crocker came to the rescue with $10,000 for the restoration work. During this restoration, the dome was raised by six feet and the eagle finial on top of the dome was replaced with the planet Saturn, likely a reference to the ancient Roman god of agriculture.

In 1918, the dome and adjoining room burned again, and in 1933 structural instabilities caused a 13-year closure. The most devastating damage was done by a wind storm in 1995. After a winter of storms, 20 percent of the trees in Golden Gate Park were toppled and wind patterns changed. As a result, a relatively mild windstorm severely damaged the newly exposed Conservatory. Forty percent of the glass smashed, a portion of the rare plants were lost, and the building had to be closed.
In early 1998, the Conservatory was placed on the 100 most Endangered World Monuments list by the World Monuments Fund. The National Trust for Historic Preservation adopted the Conservatory into its Save America's Treasures program, launched as part of then First Lady Hillary Clinton's Millennium Council projects (Clinton is seen here with Senator Barbara Boxer and Mayor Willie Brown). Publicity from these efforts eventually led to a fundraising campaign to raise the $25 million dollars for the rehabilitation, which included support from the Richard & Rhoda Goldman Fund. The Conservatory reopened in 2003.

Docents are often asked how the Conservatory faired in the earthquake of 1906. The building stood strong, without damage, and the area leading up to the building, known as Conservatory Valley, became a location of temporary tents housing San Franciscans escaping the devastation and fires throughout the city.

VICTORIAN MEETS MODERN
Since reopening in 2003, over 2 million visitors have visited the Conservatory of Flowers, including tens of thousands of school children on free educational tours and hundreds of couples marrying in the most romantic spot in San Francisco. This modern version of the Conservatory strives to connect people and plants in a way that is most meaningful for the Bay Area community and for visitors from around the world.

Travelers from the coldest places on earth stroll through the warm Special Exhibit Gallery where biannual exhibits feature prehistoric landscapes or swamps teeming with hungry carnivorous plants. Locals learn about current horticultural and gardening trends like aquascaping, find inspiration in the Conservatory's living walls, and take
workshops on building terrariums out of repurposed materials. The Conservatory holds talks by renowned authors, including Amy Stewart, author of *Wicked Plants* and *From The Ground Up*.

And the Conservatory is a place where horticultural societies, botany students, and young plant enthusiasts gather to study collections and ensure passion for living museums and conservatories will continue to flourish.

Since re-opening in 2003, over 2 million people have visited and the Conservatory has garnered numerous local, state and national awards.

**Images In The Vestibule**

**Left Column**
- Palm House at Kew Gardens, London
- Joseph Paxton’s conservatory in Devonshire, England
- Crystal Palace, London
- House of a Rubber collector on the Madeira River in Brazil from Franz Keller, “The Amazon and Madeira Rivers” (London, 1874)

**Second Column**
- Conservatory of Flowers after first fire in January of 1883
- Woodward’s Gardens Conservatory, circa 1870, located along west side of Mission Street at 13th Ave in San Francisco
- Conservatory of Flowers sometime between 1883 and 1918
- Conservatory of Flowers Aquatics Gallery, featuring *Victoria amazonica* in bloom

**Third Column**
- Conservatory of Flowers, aerial image, 1996
- Conservatory of Flowers, damage to corner of dome after storm, 1995
- Decorative wood salvaged from original building to be used during reconstruction
- Climaptron, Missouri Botanical Garden, St. Louis

**Right Column**
- View from west wing of Conservatory looking towards dome during reconstruction, 2001
- Craning of Conservatory’s upper dome onto lower dome, 2003
- Cycads being added in east wing of Conservatory
- D. Lyle Ghirardelli giving chocolate seeds from Costa Rica to Sydney Stein Rich, the first female manager at the Conservatory, 1948
History of Golden Gate Park

Golden Gate Park in 1892

![Golden Gate Park in 1892](http://foundsf.org/index.php?title=File:GG-park.jpg)

The following is excerpted from *Treasures of the Conservatory of Flowers* by Nina Sazevich.

**San Francisco at the end of the 19th Century**

As the second half of the 19th Century dawned, San Francisco was a thriving metropolis. Thousands of young Americans and immigrants from around the world had come to the west during the Gold Rush, and fortunes had been made. Many settled in San Francisco leading to an unprecedented boom in the population in the 1850s.

The Civil War had little impact on life along the West Coast. The new state of California was too busy developing and building. Men like Lick and Crocker were laying the groundwork for the state’s future economic success. In San Francisco,
grand hotels and elegant Victorian homes were popping up overnight to house an increasingly wealthy population. The San Francisco area was home to the state’s richest men. At the same time, the infamous Barbary Coast was earning the city a different kind of reputation. Prostitution, gambling, intoxication and danger were the name of the game in this part of San Francisco. Murder was not uncommon on the alleys, and many a sailor woke up miles out to sea after being shanghaied in a San Francisco saloon.

A Park for the People
Around 1866, a clamor for a large public park in San Francisco began. City authorities moved to obtain land for what would become Golden Gate Park. Prior to this, the proposed area was known as The Outside Lands – an unincorporated area of windswept dunes where squatters and shady characters went to escape the law. But by the 1870s, the 1,017-acre plot had been transformed and was a favorite spot for a weekend stroll with its theme gardens, lakes, meadows and winding roads.

Strolling, however, was not the only way that turn-of-the-century San Franciscans liked to make use of their park. The well-to-do trotted along in horse drawn buggies to see and be seen. Music concerts were extremely popular, and so the Park’s first bandstand was constructed in Conservatory Valley just to the west of the greenhouse in 1882. The preferred way to enjoy these concerts was from the comfortable seat of one’s buggy, so the city paved the valley with stone to accommodate the large numbers of horses, carts and spectators. By the time a new bandstand was built in the Park and the original was not in use, bicycling had become all the rage. The area around the Conservatory was crowded with gents and the “bloomer girls” of the 1880s and 90s who donned these undergarments to enjoy the freedom and mobility of bicycles.

Not all park pursuits were so health oriented however. A casino just west of the Conservatory attracted a rowdier element of park goer. Eventually, it was moved in an effort to clean up some of the more unsavory goings-on in the park.

For the enormous Midwinter Fair in Golden Gate Park in 1894, the valley in front of the Conservatory was planted with beds of flowers taking the form it generally has today.
The Gardens of Golden Gate Park

One of the world’s greatest urban parks, Golden Gate Park is approximately three miles long and a half mile wild (1,017 acres) and is visited by an average 75,000 people each weekend.

On April 4, 1870 the California state legislature passed an act which proclaimed the creation of a “Golden Gate Park”. Originally sand dunes blasted by harsh ocean winds, William Hammond Hall, the park’s first superintendent, established the first grass, trees and plants in the 1870’s. Several streetcar lines were ferrying the public to the park by the 1880’s. In 1890, John McLaren became the superintendent of Golden Gate Park.

The California Midwinter International Exposition of 1894, a sprawling expo, drew millions to the park from across the country. An electric tower, a Moorish style administration building, agricultural and horticultural building, mechanical arts building and a manufacturers and liberal arts building were all constructed for the fair, as well as horse stables and “exotic” theme areas including an Eskimo habitat and a Japanese Village. Remnants of this fair that exist today include the Japanese Tea Garden and the Music Concourse esplanade.

Japanese Tea Garden

In 1895, Makoto Hagiwara, a wealthy Japanese landscape designer, was appointed caretaker of the Japanese Tea Garden. It is currently the oldest Japanese-style garden in the United States.

There is some debate about who designed and built the Japanese Village for the Winter Fair of 1894 and then converted it to the Japanese Tea Garden. George Turner Marsh and Mr. Hagiwara are thought to have been involved. Originally designed as a wet walking garden, an additional smaller Zen (dry) garden was added in 1954. It was designed in a rugged style to match its surroundings, and the Hagiwara family lived on the site for many years. At the beginning of the Second World War, the Hagiwara’s were forced to relocate to internment camps, and many structures, sculptures and plants were demolished or moved (the garden was renamed the Oriental Tea Garden, although the original name was reinstated later). San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department have maintained the garden since 1942. It has seen many changes and additions over the years.
**San Francisco Botanical Gardens**

"Strybing Arboretum and Botanical Gardens is a living museum for the enjoyment and exploration of the natural world"

Opened in 1940, the 55-acre Strybing Arboretum and Botanical Gardens includes geographically themed gardens incorporating more than 7,000 plant species from the world’s Mediterranean, mild-temperate, and tropical cloud-forest climactic regions; demonstration and specialty gardens, including the Fragrance Garden and Primitive Plant Garden; the San Francisco County Fair building, housing meeting and exhibition rooms, staff offices, and Northern California’s largest horticultural library; and a plant-propagation and garden-maintenance facility.

The Gardens are owned by the City and County of San Francisco and operated by its Recreation and Park department with the support of the non-profit Strybing Arboretum society. The 4,000-member Society, founded in 1955, operates the library and bookstore, provides fundraising and collections-management services, and offers educational programs for youth and adults.

**Nearby Features**

The Conservatory is surrounded by several gardens, including the Dahlia Garden and the Tree Fern Dell. The National AIDS Memorial Grove, Fuchsia garden, tennis courts, and horseshoe pits are close by. The de Young Museum, California Academy of Sciences, Koret Children’s Quarter, and Carousel are all 10 minute walk from the Conservatory.
Recent Construction in Golden Gate Park

De Young Museum

The original Memorial Museum was started from the profits of Midwinter Fair of 1894 and the museum opened in 1895. It showcases American art from the 17th century through the present, international textile arts and costumes, and art from the Americas, the Pacific, and Africa. For many years it was a collection of buildings, first added to in 1919 and renamed the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in 1921, after the San Francisco Chronicle Publisher who worked to bring the Midwinter Fair to San Francisco. Due to seismic issues from the Loma Prieta earthquake, the second de Young was torn down. The third version opened in 2005, but still incorporates pieces of its past including: including the sphinx sculptures, the Pool of Enchantment, and the original palm trees. It is encased in copper plating, with holes meant to create tree-like shade inside the building.

Photo Credit: CTG/SF [http://www.flickr.com/photos/27966213@N08](http://www.flickr.com/photos/27966213@N08)

California Academy of Sciences

The California Academy of Sciences currently houses Steinhart Aquarium, Morrison Planetarium, the Kimball Natural History Museum and academy science researchers. Founded in 1853, it moved to Golden Gate Park in 1916, taking up residence in the North American Hall of Birds and Mammals. The building was successively added to over the years. Due to structural damage in the Loma Prieta earthquake, the building was torn down in 2005. It reopened in the park in 2008 in a platinum LEED certified building with a 2.5 acre living roof covered in native plants.

Photo Credit: [http://www.flickr.com/photos/peterkaminski](http://www.flickr.com/photos/peterkaminski)
Koret Children’s Quarter and Carousel

In 1888, the Children’s Playground opened as the first public playground for children in the United States. A carousel has been nearby ever since. The park is currently on its third carousel, this one built and carved in 1912. In 1977 it finally failed, but was restored and returned to operation in 1984. The playground closed for a year and a half for extensive renovations, re-opening as the Koret Children’s Quarter in 2007.
