

# Ventura Botanical Gardens

## 2023 Annual Report





# LETTER *from* DERRICK WILSON

**2023 PRESIDENT**

**THE PETAL PATH CREATES A SENSE OF WONDER AND DELIGHT.**

The year, 2023, marked my third year in the role of Board President and it was certainly one of remarkable expansion and flourishing growth for a wide variety of different reasons.

The word "flourish" is defined by Oxford Languages as to "grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as the result of a particularly favorable environment." What could have been more favorable than the "super blooms" from the rain early in the year? The much-needed water provided nourishment and growth for our plants long past the normal spring timeframe, allowing our guests to enjoy a longer season of spectacular color in the gardens.

Several significant garden features were installed in 2023. As you enter the Welcome Center, you can't miss our new graphic petal path, creating a sense of wonder and delight as it climbs toward the first walkway entrance—special thanks to those who have annually sponsored a petal to support the Garden mission. The telescopic viewer installed at the Merewether site in the California Native Garden has a built-in EnChroma lens, allowing color-blind visitors to experience the Gardens' wonders. The viewer, along with the completion of additional pathways and the groundbreaking of others, increases the long-range accessibility and inclusiveness of the Gardens.

Looking up into the hillside, I am impressed by the many changes that are newly visible, thanks to our generous donors, volunteers, and staff. The Mediterranean palm trees, the volcanic rock site, the olive trees, the brick wall, and the stairs are exciting recent additions to the Gardens.

Finally, our staff and volunteers have been great! These garden enthusiasts generously give their time and talents — I am grateful for their continued support of the Gardens' mission. It is through their efforts the Gardens have seen many successful events - whether it is our "New Member Open House", our afternoon brunches or evening events, Perennial parties, tasting events with Ventura Spirits and Transmission Brewery, various lectures and learning opportunities, and even the occasional wedding; all of this would not be possible without those working behind the scenes dedicating long hours to ensure their success.

The Ventura Botanical Gardens flourished in 2023. As we continue to grow and develop, I look forward to what future years will bring.

*Derrick Wilson*

**OUR NATIVE WILDFLOWERS AND COLLECTIONS OF RARE AND ENDANGERED PLANTS FLOURISHED LIKE NEVER BEFORE.**



# LETTER *from* JOE CAHILL

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

I'd count 2023 as a pretty good year for VBG. With the winter deluge, California native wildflowers and our collections of rare and endangered plants flourished like never before. Many California chaparral evergreen shrubs are reaching maturity and dot our garden pathways like green oases even in the dry summer. The outstanding flowering through the seasons was accompanied by a cascade of special moments that proved what we can accomplish together.

The number of students on school field trips exceeded all past years. One thing that really touched me is helping our volunteers guide our local kids, many of whom have had few opportunities to interact with nature and plants. Learning to communicate with the natural world is an easy step for children who have trouble expressing their needs. The botanical gardens are a learning environment where everyone can relax, enjoy, explore, and discover.

We continue to make good progress toward our conservation goal, which calls for strengthening our efforts around the rare, threatened, and endangered plants in our care One outstanding example is the development of the volcanic outcrop garden area, which is growing to be a special place to display and educate about the rarest native plants found in the Ventura region and nowhere else in the world. The volcanic garden offers visitors a unique experience that no other botanic garden offers.

The year was also dominated by planning studies that will enable us to continue to build and maintain the gardens. Your ongoing steadfast support has allowed our design professionals to diligently work on the vision for advancing our mission into its second phase. As ever, the valued input of our supporters has made the emerging vision even more thoughtful and exciting. I know this because of the incredible creativity, collaboration, passion, and hard work I have witnessed over the past year. We set a high bar with our expectations, track record, and stellar team – that makes me very proud. I hope you share that pride, as it is only with the help of our supporters that we succeed and your botanical gardens thrive.

*Joe Cahill*





# EDIBLES IN THE GARDEN

Like many botanic gardens, our conservation mission extends to rare and unique cultivars of edible plants. Our olive grove is ripe with diversity (over 40 different cultivars) and continues to expand, with new cultivars added each year. It is so exciting to be a part of preserving humanity's ancient agricultural heritage right here in Ventura.

Nestled within our plant collections under conservation are numerous wild plant species. These cultivars are a delicious and sustainable edible food source or are important wild relatives of crop plants. Visitors find many of these edible plants captivating with exotic and sensational flavor experiences.

One such exciting and unique plant is the Chilean ugni berry *Ugni molinae*, also known as the Chilean guava. Each deep mulberry-colored berry is a burst of intense flavor reminiscent of passion fruit, tangerine, and green apple. In the 19th century, this was the favorite fruit of England's Queen Victoria. A few plants are tucked away in shady places in our Chilean garden, and as our trees grow, more ugni berry shrubs will be added.

Our wild beach strawberry *Fragaria chiloensis* is one of the ancestor parents of all our domesticated hybrid strawberries. It is native to both California and Chile and nowhere in between! This wonderful plant is an excellent example of the deep bonds of similarity among our sister Mediterranean climate regions.

In the California chaparral and native pines areas of the gardens, observant visitors will see pink and bright yellow flowers on small shrubs under the trees and larger shrubs in the spring. The plant collections include Chaparral current *Ribes malvaceum* and the Golden current *Ribes aruem*. The fruit of many kinds of currants were eaten by indigenous peoples throughout California and are still harvested from the wild and eaten today. The Golden current fruit has a unique spicy aroma evocative of the sweetness of carnations blended with the intensity and exoticism of the clove. The species occurs throughout much of the western U.S. and is now cultivated by home gardeners in California.

We are slowly and thoughtfully building our collections of these wild food plants to capture more of the genetic diversity of these species for conservation. These conservation-based collections will also impact regional agriculture by firmly rooting future research projects in the search for ways to adapt our core crops and find new crops resilient to climate change.

LAST YEAR'S BEAUTIFUL BLOOMS INSPIRED A RECORD NUMBER OF VISITORS TOURING THE GARDENS

# SPECTACULAR SPRING BLOOM

BY TRACY LONG

One beautiful spring morning this past year, a bewildered visitor to Ventura stopped by the Welcome Center to ask how far they would need to drive to see the super bloom. Our answer was (of course), "You don't need to drive anywhere. We have a superbloom right here."

Super blooms are exceptional. For them to occur, several years of drought with lots of seeds but not enough water for germination must first occur. Then, we need rain - lots of it. Next, we need the sun and temperate days. And then, voila, an explosion of color.

In the spring of 2023, thanks to abundant rainfall at just the right time, Ventura Botanical Gardens visitors were treated to a rich display of colorful blooms throughout our hillsides.

Because the design of our garden organizes species into natural plant families, the bloom started in the South African gardens with the aloes' bright red and orange spikes. As this spectacle continued, trees thick with blooms and succulents with giant blossoms began to appear in the California garden. The Ramble (our California native garden) was alive with the purple-white blossoms of lupine and the vibrant orange of California poppies. A thick carpet of lush color blanketed the Chilean garden with cistanthe grandiflora (and its shocking fuchsia blooms) and salpiglossis, also called the Painted Tongue, showing off its vivid and broad range of veiny colors.

Guests, volunteers, and staff alike were at a loss for words as they returned from their walks. *"Stunning," "amazing," "gorgeous," "I've never seen anything like it"* were just a few of the remarks that we heard in the Welcome Center. You needed to see it to believe it.

This is the first big bloom that our visitors could enjoy. After the Thomas fire, replanting, and our first rainy season in 2020, we experienced our first bloom. Unfortunately, the Gardens were closed for Covid and sadly, only the staff could enjoy it.

Last year's beautiful blooms inspired a record number of visitors to check out the gardens. News coverage of the bloom, social media, and word of mouth brought people from all over Southern California to see for themselves. As we greeted guests, we were reminded of how much people enjoy experiencing the beauty of nature. Our garden assistants worked hard to nurture the blooms and keep the beds and paths clear, open, and accessible. Humans weren't the only ones to appreciate the abundance. Wildlife was attracted by healthy plant growth and the array of bright colors. Some mornings, the songs of delighted birds were overwhelming. Photographers did their best to capture the beauty; we had a record number of impressive submissions to the spring photo contest.

This year, the rains are promising the possibility of another beautiful spring. We look forward to many more new visitors experiencing what nature has in store.


Judges Choices
Best Overall 1st Place - Denise Dewire


Judges Choices - Best Overall 2nd Place - Denise Dewire


Judges Choices
Botanical Closeup 1st Place - Lina Li


Judges Choices
Critters 1st Place - Matthew Bear


Judges Choices - Garden Scenes 1st Place - Elizabeth Revenis

# A GIFT TO OUR SON

**BY NICOLE HORN**

I've volunteered on the Board of Directors and Design Committee for nine years. As a landscape architect with a background in environmental science and urban planning, I've donated my time and technical knowledge to design portions of the Gardens with my husband, Noah Greer, who is also an architect.

We got married at Summit Plateau five years ago. Together, Noah and I designed or oversaw many of the major construction projects in the Gardens. Our wedding allowed us to share this precious place with the ones we love. We spent years dedicated to the transformation of Grant Park — from under-utilized feral land to a fledgling botanic garden, now complete with a welcome center, nursery, and miles of garden walkways. What we draw on paper becomes reality. Every time we visit, we see the gardens evolve. There are more families, young couples, and people of all ages yearly. We love how popular the Gardens have become. Noah and I believe the Gardens are defining the future of Ventura.

As I write this, in a few weeks, our son Mojave will be two years old. His youth reminds me that our dreams for the Gardens will become his reality over the coming decades. This place is part of our family legacy. Mojave loves to run the trails, pick flowers before we can stop him, and inspect the ground for bugs and other treasures. I adore that he already finds the natural world exciting. I hope he inherits our sense of stewardship for the environment and our desire to leave the places we touch better than when we found them.



PHOTO: CASSANDRA BARRAGAN



When I read about the seemingly endless barrage of climate disasters, it leaves me stressed and overwhelmed. I feel small and insignificant. I worry if I aam doing "enough"? Am I making a difference at all? So, I want to assure everyone who has contributed to the Gardens, that we are all making a difference. Right now. In our own backyard. Together, we are transforming 100 acres of forgotten land into a vibrant, living collection of plants, insects, and animals. The Gardens will continue to delight visitors, bolster our local community, and improve the region's environmental resilience for future generations.

Today, we hold our son's hand and walk past trees that will eventually stretch up and over the walkway. Someday, Mojave will walk the same path beneath the canopy of those same trees, chasing his own children. Noah and I are so fortunate - we will watch the Gardens and our son grow together. Our creations will endure and flourish long after we are gone.

# STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

*For the Years Ended December 31, 2023 and 2022*
*(Unaudited)*

| | TOTALS | |
|---|---|---|
| | 2023 (unaudited) | 2022 (audited) |
| **REVENUE AND SUPPORT** | | |
| Special Event Revenue | $ 288,700 | $ 61,381 |
| Special Event Costs | (62,317) | (49,160) |
| **TOTAL SPECIAL EVENTS, NET** | **226,383** | **12,221** |
| Contributions and Grants | 358,804 | 2,484,377 |
| In-kind Donations | 41,208 | 51,315 |
| Memberships and Admissions | 223,200 | 181,968 |
| Other Income | | 11,536 |
| **INVESTMENT RETURN, NET** | 188,086 | (338,506) |
| Gift Shop Sales Revenue | 84,007 | 81,481 |
| Gift Shop Sales Costs | (55,318) | (41,639) |
| **GIFT SHOP SALES, NET** | **28,690** | **39,788** |
| **TOTAL REVENUES AND SUPPORT** | **1,066,370** | **2,442,699** |
| **EXPENSES** | | |
| Garden Expenses | 663,230 | 645,305 |
| General and Administrative | 540,354 | 324,778 |
| Fundraising | 185,251 | 262,541 |
| **TOTAL EXPENSES** | **1,388,835** | **1,232,624** |
| Increase in Net Assets | (322,465) | 1,210,075 |
| Net Assets at the Beginning of the Year | 7,469,355 | 6,162,076 |
| Net assets at the End of The Year | $ 7,146,890 | $ 7,372,151 |

*To Our Key Contributors*

# THANK YOU

## MAJOR GIFTS

Mary Kay Doubek
Sandy Lassila
Jonell McLain
Mike Merewether
Sue Van Gemert

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# 2023

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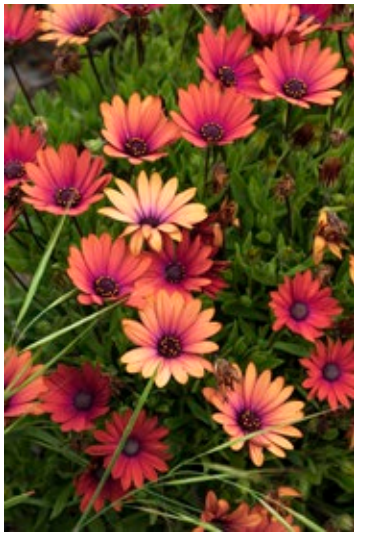
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**DESIGNED BY SEARLE CREATIVE GROUP**
**PHOTOS BY PHIL RANGER**