Luxuriant public gardens bursting with exotic plants are a legacy of philanthropists past, their botanical brilliance and architectural eccentricity a perennial drawcard for Southern California.

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Lotusland
Cold Spring Road, Montecito.
(805) 969-9990. lotusland.org (reservations required)
The grand dame of gardens takes its name from the sacred flower that grows on its grounds. When Polish-born opera singer Ganna Walska (above, in 1937) moved onto the property in 1941, she enhanced the existing gardens with an avant-garde design that showed off her flamboyant yet sophisticated style. After her death in 1984, Lotusland was left to the Ganna Walska Lotusland Foundation, and the first scheduled tour took place in 1993. For more than two decades, docents have guided the public through the 10ha gardens, where orchid cacti dangle from coast live oaks, rare cycads (which cost Walska her jewellery collection) vanguard a koi-filled pond, and a circus of 26 toposy animals circle a 75m-wide, working horticultural clock. There’s also a whimsical theatre garden with a troupe of stone sculptures, a Seussian aloe garden, and a water garden where, come summer, the lotus flower thrives.

Casa del Herrero
1387 East Valley Road, Montecito.
(805) 565-5653. casadelherrero.com (reservations required)
Casa del Herrero (House of the Blacksmith) is a magnificent celebration of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture. Completed in 1925, the former home of St Louis-raised industrialist George Fox Steedman and his wife remains largely intact – the 4ha National Historic Landmark has operated as a house museum since 1976. Gilded Age railroad and real estate mogul Henry Edwards Huntington transformed hundreds of his green acres into a microcosm of the global botanical landscape and sought not only to preserve native and unusual species, but to maintain the grounds in perpetuity for the enjoyment of generations to come.

Southern California’s allure is hidden within the depths of its gardens and plant museums, which distill human history, chart the evolutionary landscape and serve as templates for newer green spaces. A stroll through the legendary sycamores, pines and shrines across Orange, Los Angeles and Santa Barbara counties is a constant source of inspiration for the enthusiastic gardener, serious horticulturist and pure philocalist (lover of beauty).
and garden since 1993. Every window frames a carefully orchestrated garden view. Side rooms overlook a loggia and rows of standing roses — Steedman’s favourite flower. The rear faces a star-shaped fountain in Andalusian tile and a formal garden, whose lush lawns unravel through an aisle of jasmine before reaching a cornucopia of ferns, camellias and a desert garden presided over by a dragon tree. The combined talents of antiquarians, horticulturists, landscape architects and a steadfast Steedman have shaped one of the most handsome garden spaces in Montecito.

**The Getty Villa**

23985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades. (310) 440 7300. getty.edu

Oil magnate J Paul Getty’s art and antiquities museum near Malibu was modelled after the Villa dei Papiri, a retreat in Herculaneum that was excavated centuries after being buried under the force of Vesuvius in AD79. Replicas of salvaged ancient bronze statues decorate the property’s Roman-inspired gardens, designed by Denis Kunetz and Emmet Wemple. An immaculate symmetrical display (featuring clipped balls of topiary, grapevine arbours, European fan palms and trompe l’oeil-fake garden mural) surrounds a 67m reflective pool in a large peristyle garden, flanked by the Santa Monica Mountains and Pacific Ocean. In addition to a garden of fragrant herbs and the smaller peristyle, a meditative garden evokes a feeling of repose with its green and blue mosaic tile work, running water fountains and shade-providing laurel trees.

**San Ysidro Ranch**

900 San Ysidro Lane, Santa Barbara. (805) 565 1700. sanysidroranch.com

A wonderful sense of romance infuses the gardens of this luxury hideaway, where Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier were married in 1940. A painterly drive coloured by olive trees and brushstrokes of lavender leads to the entry hacienda, bowed by blushing bougainvillea. Situated in the foothills of the Santa Ynez Mountains in Montecito, English gardens hug 41 whitewashed cottages and a lily pond add an impressionist touch. Herbs, fuzzy-topped fennel and climbing peas grow in the Chef’s Organic Garden and supply the Stonehouse restaurant — a 19th-century citrus-packing house — with fresh ingredients for its dishes and seasonal cocktails.

**The Getty Center**

1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles. (310) 440 7300. getty.edu

Artist Robert Irwin spent five years working on the Central Garden design before it was unveiled at the opening of the Getty Center in 1997 (thanks to the J Paul Getty Trust). The result: a 0.44ha colour-wheel of California natives and seasonal transplant. After navigating a natural ravine, the tree-lined walkway leads to a gravelled plaza sprouting three bougainvillea arbours before revealing the centrepiece: a floating maze of azaleas.

The layered gardens that grace its circumference put on a striking show year-round. California poppies paint spring a riotous shade of red, while fragrant Brazilian angel’s trumpets sweeten the summer air. The red and yellow blossoms of the Spanish flag brighten throughout autumn and red twig dogwood keep company with fuzzy yellow Kangaroo paws during the winter. The white travertine museum features courtyard fountains, a cactus garden at the South Promontory and unrivalled 360-degree LA views from its mountaintop perch.

**Clockwise from above:**

- Getty Center bougainvillea;
- Getty Villa; Casa del Herrero;
- Getty Center; San Ysidro Ranch; Getty Villa; Casa del Herrero
Treasure Island Park

Wesley & Coast Highway, Laguna Beach.
(949) 497 3311. lagunabeachcity.net

Set on an oceanfront bluff, Treasure Island Park’s spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean are framed by velvety Mexican sage, orange cape honeysuckle, sun-worshipping succulents, and the occasional flutter of a hummingbird. The former camping ground site (seen in the 1953 Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz movie The Long, Long Trailer) was redeveloped into the upscale Montage Hotel and Treasure Island Park in 2003. The grounds beautifully represent the eclectic and creative Laguna Beach community. Six art works were installed as part of the city’s Art in Public Places requirements. Life-Force – The Mural by Dora De Larios is one of the most photographed.

Greystone Park

905 Loma Vista Drive, Beverly Hills.
(310) 285 6830. greystonemansion.org

Long used as a filming location (Batman & Robin, Ghostbusters, X-Men), this Gothic revival mansion (1927) was designed for the family of oil heir El “Ned” Doheny Jr. Its hillside location above Sunset Boulevard makes the grounds seem larger than the 14,600 sq ft home. Sited beneath a canopy of Eucalyptus, a 400-plant lily pond, inner courtyard with a fountain, and slated walkways convey its golden-age grandeur. Catch the Concours d’Elegance, an annual car show held in the grounds in May.

Life-Force – The Mural by Dora De Larios is one of the most photographed.

The Mildred E Mathias Botanical Garden UCLA

777 Tiverton Drive, Los Angeles.
(310) 825 1260. botgard.ucla.edu

Located at the crossroads of Westwood’s residential and commercial districts on the UCLA campus, this garden feels like a well-kept secret. Its three dense hectares are hidden from the road by diverse subtropical trees including two sky-grazing Eucalyptus grums, a Queensland rose gum and the rare dawn redwoods, known only as a fossil until seeds were brought from China in 1948. Started in 1937, the arboretum expanded in the 1950s to include California perennials and Hawaiian natives alongside floating aquatics, koi and turtles in a recycling stream. A recent $US5m ($5.7m) donation by philanthropist Morton La Kretz will build a welcome centre and classroom, due for completion in 2016.

The Huntington Library, Art Collections & Botanical Gardens

1151 Oxford Road, San Marino.
(626) 405 2100. huntington.org

Established by a non-profit educational trust and opened in 1928, this diverse plant palette covering nearly 49ha was heavily influenced by landscape gardener William Hertig’s natural touch and experimental approach. Simuous paths traverse a dozen principal gardens: the otherworldly 4ha Desert Garden contains 4000 plant species and a display of 500 golden barrel cacti; a romantic rose garden – which supplied the Huntington household with blooms for its grand floral arrangements – and one of the nation’s most comprehensive camellia collections. The Garden of Flowing Fragrance invites guests to enjoy tea among tranquil Chinese pavilions. A $US16m ($58.6m) Education and Visitor Center with 2ha of new gardens opens early next year.

The Lake Shrine

17190 Sunset Boulevard, Pacific Palisades.
(310) 454 2114. lakeshrine.org

There’s a mystical quality about this 4ha site centred on a spring-fed lake. Opened in 1923 by Paramahansa Yogananda, founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship and author of Autobiography Of A Yogi, it was dedicated as a harmonious space for all religions. Behind an arched gateway screened with gold painted lotus flowers rests the open-air Mahatma Gandhi World Peace Memorial, where a portion of the peacemaker’s ashes are enshrined in a stone sarcophagus. Meditation services are held under the dome of a Hilltop temple, while lake-facing benches surrounded by palms and wildflowers welcome quiet contemplation. Upon acquisition of the property, Paramahansa Yogananda said, “You will see, later on, this will be a pilgrimage place. People will come from all over the world.” The natural amphitheatre is a serene home to swans, turtles and waterfowl, visited by thousands of people every year.