Rescuing Eden

The huge sea clam fountain feeds water into the abalone-shell pool at Lotusland in this picture from the book.

Lotusland in Montecito among 30 historic gardens featured in new coffee table book

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Ranging from wonderful to woebegone, from grand estates to suburban plots, 30 gardens throughout the United States are featured in "Rescuing Eden: Preserving America's Historic Gardens" (The Monacelli Press, $50).

Among them is Lotusland in Montecito.

Others include the Minnesota Woman Suffrage Garden in St. Paul, Minn., The Gardens of Alcatraz in San Francisco, the Pearl Fryar Topiary Garden in Bishopville, S.C., and the Historic Deepwood Estate and Gaiety Hollow in Salem, Ore.

"We considered over 40 gardens but had strict criteria: The gardens had to have been created privately — hence, no botanical gardens — they had to have been in a crisis of destruction by abandonment, neglect, development, etc., and they had to be not only rescued but opened to the public," author Caroline Sebohm told the News-Press by email. She wrote the text that accompanies the 200 lush photographs taken by Curtice Taylor for the 213-page coffee table tome.

While on a cruise from Venice to Barcelona, Ms. Sebohm wrote that "Lotusland fit these criteria — just. Shortage of funds put it under serious threat, and local support basically saved it. It was pleasing to be able to feature such an extraordinary, idiosyncratic garden in the more traditional landscapes we write about. "Lotusland is one-of-a-kind. What a tragedy if it had been lost."

In the book, there are eight pages devoted to the garden, most of them filled with photographs of the lotus pond, "filled with the lovely spongy flowers," the huge sea clam fountain feeding water into the "abalone-shell
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pool," massive spears of cacti
and agaves and "a winding path
leading through spectacular
topiary toward the massed
tropical collections arrayed under
the trees."

Ms. Seebohm writes in the text
that "Lotusland was created by
a wildly unconventional Polish
woman, who became Ganna
Walska, a multiply-married opera
singer, supporter of Tibetan
monks, socialist and ultimately
garden designer ... Lotusland
is a creation as passionate and
melodramatic as any of the grand
operas this Polish diva failed
to conquer. Walska's garden
is her ultimate triumph, her
performance here will never be
forgotten."

Gwen Stauffer, Lotusland's
executive director, said she is
"thrilled to be included mostly
because Lotusland is such a
community gem that was almost
lost and to have part of our history
and garden story recognized
in this book is a reminder that
Lotusland is precious."

Ms. Seebohm, who lives on the
Delaware River in New Jersey,
was born and grew up in England
— "land of garden-lovers and
garden-preservers. I have spent
most of my career writing about
houses and gardens for magazines
and books."

A graduate of Oxford University,
she became involved with the
book through Mr. Taylor, the
photographer, an old friend who
had been working on the project
for several years.

"He needed a writer to get
it published. So — voila! I was
thrilled to do it as it's a very,
very important subject. Being
English, I knew how Americans
needed to step up, and as the
book shows, many of them have
— magnificently!" said Ms.
Seebohm.

"I hope that the stories
about these gardens will
inspire readers to look to their
landscapes with more respect.
Gardens that were designed as
long ago as the mid-18th century
are featured in the book —
gardens that, but for the heroic
efforts of local garden lovers and
preservationists, would have
been destroyed by the wrecker's
ball, neglect, abandonment,
development, even the horror of a
parking lot.

"And once destroyed, such
magical landscapes could never
be re-made. The title of the book
could well have been 'Saved!'"
said Ms. Seebohm.

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FYI

"Rescuing Eden: Preserving
America's Historic Gardens"
(The Monicelli Press, $50) is
available for purchase at the
Lotusland Garden Shop and
at amazon.com. For more
information, call 969-9990.

Curtice Taylor photographed the lotus pond at Lotusland.