Ganna Walska Lotusland

**PAUL MILLS** introduces a botanical nirvana in Santa Barbara and tells the story of the extraordinary personality who created it.

Ganna Walska Lotusland, the 1-hectare (37-acre) estate of the late Madame Ganna Walska, is a rare botanical nirvana that is consistently rated one of the best gardens in the world. Its rich horticultural history, avant garde design and globally important plant collections make Lotusland a uniquely important garden. Around every corner a magical, sensory surprise reveals itself. The botanic garden is situated in the foothills of Montecito, California, and is home to more than 3,300 plant species from around the world. Its history is a fascinating tale of colourful personalities, extremely talented designers and brilliant horticulturists.

The woman who was to become the extraordinary Ganna Walska was born Hanna Puacz in 1887 in Brest-Litovsk, Poland. At the onset of her musical studies, Hanna Puacz took the stage name of Madame Ganna Walska. Over the next two decades she sang in America and Europe, culminating with a move to Montecito, California. At the encouragement of Theos Bernard, her sixth and last husband, she purchased the Cuesta Linda estate in Santa Barbara in 1941, intending to use it as a retreat for Tibetan monks, and renamed it Tibetland.

The Tibetan monks never appeared, and sometime later, after divorcing Bernard, Madame Walska changed the name of her estate to Lotusland in honour of the sacred Indian lotus growing in one of the ponds on the property. She then
herself as ‘an enemy of the average’ – truly a woman of unique accomplishments, philosophies and imagination.

Origins
Lotusland was originally part of a government land grant of 39.65 hectares (98 acres) made on 2 June, 1877 and after passing through several other owners, it was bought by Ralph Kinton Stevens and his new bride, Caroline Lucy Tallant, on August 11 1882. Much of the property had already been cleared, although apparently enough native oak (Quercus agrifolia) woodland remained for them to dub it Tanglewood. Stevens developed an enthusiasm for plant collecting and began propagating exotic plants acquired from all over the world.

He befriended the captains and crew of ships that docked at Santa Barbara. They returned his hospitality by sending cuttings and seeds of plants from such far-flung locales as Australia, South Africa, South America and the East Indies.

Stevens’s 1893 nursery catalogue of tropical and subtropical plants was one of the first to be published in California. It listed over 50 palm species and many other exotics. Many of the oldest plants currently on the property date to the Stevens’ era, including over 40 mature Chilean palms (Jubaea chilensis).

Soon after purchasing the estate in 1941, Madame Walska began building the exotic plant collections and gardens that we see today.

One of her first landscape transformations was in front of the main house, where she replaced the more traditional landscape with one of cacti and towering Euphorbia ingens mulched with chunks of obsidian – there was no lack of drama and flair in her landscape designs. At this time Madame Walska was working with renowned landscape architect Lockwood de Forest who wrote to her, ‘You are wonderful! I never would have thought of using cactus at the front door or many of the other plantings you suggested. They are very handsome and I congratulate you.’

In the 1950s Kinton Stevens’s son, Ralph, who had grown up on the property, came to work for Madame Walska after studying Landscape Architecture on the East Coast. He worked with her to create some of the iconic gardens of Lotusland including the Theater Garden, the pool and its accompanying beach with giant clam shells, the Blue Garden, the horticultural clock and the mass plantings of Agave attenuata and Aloe × salm-dyckiana on the Main Drive.

Plans, projects and plants
Several major garden projects took place in the 1960s and early 1970s, beginning with the creation of the Bromeliad Garden. Always pushing horticultural limits, it was not believed at the time that the tropical, epiphytic bromeliads would survive outdoors. But working with Fritz Kubish, a nurseryman from Southern California, Madame Ganna Walska created an outstanding display of bromeliads around the pavilion in which she lived. The bromeliads proliferated so much that an entire new area was created for them. Today, the impressive collection contains 30 genera and 305 taxa including some notable Aechmea, Bromelia, Neoregelia, Nidularium, Alcantarea, Tillandsia, Hectia, Puya and Dyckia.

In the 1960s Madame Ganna Walska conceived one of her most ambitious projects – the creation of a Japanese-style garden. It was built around the pond – originally the reservoir excavated by Kinton
Stevens – that she filled with lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*) and implemented by stonemason Oswald ‘Ozzie’ Da Ros as well as by her gardener and aesthetic pruner, Frank Fujii. The Japanese Garden, the largest on the property, evolved over the years. In 1969 horticulturist and garden designer Bill Paylen was hired to create a fern garden, which also contains other shade-loving plants – most notably a collection of more than 120 different begonias, many acquired from Rudy Ziesenhenne, a local expert in the genus. Paylen's speciality was designing lush shade gardens, so he incorporated many tropical and subtropical plants such as *Heliconia latispatha*, aroids including *Xanthosoma*, *Allocaasia odora* and *Amorphophallus konjac*, angel's trumpet (*Brugmansia versicolor*) and gingers. The garden houses 150 taxa of ferns from towering Australian tree ferns (*Cyathea cooperi*) and bird's nest ferns (*Asplenium nidus*) to more diminutive plants in the genera *Blechnum* and *Adiantum*.

**Cycads and more**
Madame Ganna Walska was able to encourage Charlie Glass and Bob Foster to come work for her in 1973. The editors of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America's journal, they were world-renowned botanical explorers as well as founders and owners of Abbey Garden Cactus and Succulent Nursery. Bob stayed at Lotusland for two years; Charlie worked for Ganna Walska for eleven. One project of this era was the renovation and redesign of the Aloe Garden and the Main Drive cactus and *Euphorbia* plantings. They donated much of their personal collection of aloe for the garden, including plants that had originally been collected by such notable explorers as Cynthia Giddy and John Lavranos. Since Madame would not allow heavy equipment into the garden, tons of soil, rock and mulch were moved by hand. The Aloe Garden now has 171 different taxa of *Aloe* and is flanked by towering Chilean palms (*Jubaea chilensis*) surrounding a reflecting pond lined with abalone shells – a signature Lotusland garden.

The Main Drive's cactus and *Euphorbia* plantings were separated, moving the cacti to the east side of the drive and the African euphorbias to the west, to show the convergent evolution of the two unrelated plant families. The existing plants were lifted, the soil improved and built up into raised beds for better drainage.

**Lotusland's Mission Statement:**
We preserve and enhance the unique, historic estate of Madame Ganna Walska, care for and improve its collections, and develop its conservation and horticulture programs, so they educate us, inspire us, and advance our understanding and appreciation of the importance of plants in our lives and in the life of the planet.

As Glass continued working at Lotusland he created what he felt was his greatest achievement – the Cycad Garden. Madame Ganna Walska already had a world-class cycad collection but it was jammed into a shady corner. Charlie got permission to develop an area of approximately 0.6-hectares (1.5-acres) for this irreplaceable collection. The plants were arranged by genus with the most important plants – three massive individuals of *Encephalartos woodii* – perched on a rocky cliff above their own Koi pond.

Of the 150 different cycads in the garden *E. woodii* stands out because it is now extinct in nature. Only one plant was ever found in the wild: seven offsets and four branches (the entire plant) were collected between 1903 and 1916 and brought to Durban Botanic Garden in South Africa. All plants in collections come from vegetative propagations of this one male plant. Our three trees are known as 'The Three Bachelors', since no female plant exists.

**Legacy**
Up until the last few years of her life, Ganna Walska was the ‘head gardener’ of Lotusland. She died here on March 2, 1984 leaving the garden and entire estate to what is today a public charity. Staff were hired and began working on infrastructure improvements; garden renovations were begun with the ultimate goal of turning Lotusland into a public botanic garden.

Madame Walska’s desire was ‘to develop Lotusland to its maximum capacity into the most outstanding center of horticultural significance and of educational use.’ After more than 60 public hearings over nine years, in 1993 the County of Santa Barbara gave permission for the public to tour Lotusland and attend programmes, with a limit of 5,000 visitors a year. Today, 15,000 visitors can visit annually, along with an additional 5,000 local students.

A visitor centre was completed and in keeping with Madame Walska's penchant for themed gardens, an Australian Garden was created within the old eucalyptus grove. The design massed plants in the *Myrtaceae*, with *Grevillea* and *Acacia* to screen the parking area, and placing some more unusual specimens, such as *Anigozanthus*, *Doryanthes* and *Xanthorrhoea* for dramatic effect. The walkway through which visitors enter the...
(Top) The strange weeping habit of *Euphorbia ingens* in front of the main house.

(Above left) The main house seen through a curtain of euphorbias and cacti.

(Above) Madame Ganna Walska in characteristically flamboyant pose, picking lemons.

(Left) The ponds still host the sacred lotuses for which the garden is named.
garden was covered with an arbour planted with Australian tea trees (Leptospermum laevigatum).

The Dunlap collection
Madame Walska’s cactus collection was lauded in a 1952 issue of The Cactus and Succulent Journal as ‘one of the outstanding cactus gardens of the West.’ As a result the Cactus and Succulent society scheduled several visits and it was admired by hundreds of cactus growers. One was Merritt S Dunlap of Glendale. Concerned about the future of his own collection, in 1966 Dunlap offered to bequeath it to Lotusland and Madame Walska accepted. Dunlap continued to expand his collection for 33 more years, having received his first plant in 1929 and acquiring his last in 1999. He changed his bequest into a donation and the contents of his small greenhouse came to Lotusland early in 2000. During 2001, the rest of his cacti were moved in 12 weekly trips with a stake-sided truck.

To avoid damaging the larger specimens, wooden boxes were constructed around their partially excavated roots before lifting them; uprights on the boxes were secured to a framework built across the truck bed. Finally, the 31 largest cacti were loaded onto semi-trucks for the trip to Lotusland.

Construction of the Cactus Garden, designed by Eric Nagleman, began in February 2003. Plants are grouped by their country of origin, as they had been in Dunlap’s garden, and 272 tonnes (300 US tons) of basalt was used to create planting beds and a central viewing mound. The full scope of the garden is only seen from the mound viewing platform. At ground level, the impressive size of the cacti and basalt columns along the paths overwhelms the senses. Rugged ‘outcroppings’ of basalt boulders and the heat-reflecting dark slate mulch create a sense of a harsh, alien territory, suitable only for the toughest inhabitants. In 2003 Merritt Dunlap celebrated his 97th birthday in the newly created garden housing his collection.

A philosophy for the future
One of the largest, most ambitious projects in our history is just finishing. The renovation of the Japanese Garden, begun in 2017, will restore the body and soul of this favourite, iconic garden.

In addressing long-overdue upgrades to the pond and water circulation, it will also create accessible pathways, add gathering spaces for events and respite and help to fulfil Madame Walska’s vision for the garden of helping to connect humans with nature.

Environmental responsibility is valued at Lotusland, not only for the garden’s sake, but also as a model for others. As exemplary stewards of the environment, the staff have adopted pesticide-free and sustainable techniques, maintaining plant health by organic methods. The soil is improved by using compost and mulch derived from green waste. Beneficial insects, fostered in insectaries, are released to devour pests, and weeds are eliminated by hand. Chemical fertilizers and toxic products are avoided, benefitting the garden and its visitors.

Guests at Lotusland are led on tours by expertly trained volunteers who help to interpret the collections and educate on the importance of conservation and biodiversity. Through the generosity of its members and other benefactors, Lotusland is in a constant state of renewal – restoring early garden features long past their prime. These donations have not only maintained the property but have funded innumerable educational programs, work-experience training and internships for students.

Lotusland is supported by donations, members, admission fees, fundraising events, grants and a very modest endowment. The financial challenges of preserving, maintaining and enhancing this botanical wonder are significant and require constant fundraising and work towards our goal of creating a financially sustainable organization. These funds are invested in efforts that benefit the community and all those who visit the garden.

PAUL MILLS is Curator of the Living Collections at Ganna Walska Lotusland.
(Top) Some of the exotica so characteristic of Lotusland - agaves, cacti, euphorbias and palms.

(Above left) The Dunlap Cactus Garden contains one of the most important plant collections to be found at Lotusland.

(Above) The Aloe Garden is a signature Lotusland garden, indicative of Walska’s distinctive style.

(Left) The Cycad Garden with the ‘three bachelors’, *Encephalartos woodii*, producing their splendid but futile male cones.
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