SENSE OF DRAMA

Distinctive and daring, this oasis in Santa Barbara reflects its creator Ganna Walska’s vivacious persona and leaves a lasting impression.

BY FIONA MCCARTHY PHOTOGRAPHED BY CLAIRE TAKACS
“It is completely impossible to separate the creator from the creation”

Owen Stauffer

These pages golden barrel cactus in front of the main house designed by Reginald Johnson, completed in 1929.
AS THE DAY BREAKS and a dewy mist gently rises up through the Californian gardens of Lotusland, you can easily imagine hearing its creator Madame Ganna Walska, an aspiring opera diva turned horticultural visionary, singing among the Jurassic-sized agaves and prized cycads. Or perhaps that’s just the heavenly native birdsong, floating along on the salty Montecito breeze, lending a wistful romance to what is already one of the world’s most admired botanical nirvanas.

“It is completely impossible to separate the creator from the creation,” says Gwen Stauffer, Ganna Walska Lotusland’s chief executive officer, of the passionate gardener who first bought the estate in 1941 with her then sixth (and final) husband, Theos Bernard, a hatha yoga guru. The couple had originally intended to establish a retreat for Tibetan monks, but the monks never came and Bernard, many years Walska’s junior, made a run for the Himalayas, taking much of her priceless Tibetan art and books with him.

Ever the optimist, Madame, as she’s still reverentially known, swore off men for good, and threw mind, body and soul — and millions of dollars, thanks to a long string of wealthy husbands — into creating the newly named Lotusland. Over the 40 years until her death at the age of 96, Walska masterminded a series of 25 gardens across 15 hectares in the foothills of Santa Barbara. In this veritable garden wonderland, she showcased more than 3000 different species of plants sourced from all four corners of the globe.

Luckily for Walska, the bones of a formal garden were already well established — the estate had been originally developed in 1882 as a garden nursery, with its second owner adding the Italianate gardens, pools and the Spanish-style villa, which still stands today. Enter Walska stage left. “She went beyond what any garden designer would have dared to do,” says Stauffer. “No average person could possibly create a garden that is as spectacular, extraordinary and timeless as this.”

Even today, Madame’s irreverent spirit can be felt. In the way succulents dangle like jellyfish tentacles from baskets hung over the boughs of coast live oaks bordering the Grand Lawn to the topiaries clipped as fanciful animals and geometric forms, standing guard over a horticultural clock embellished with copper zodiac signs. Her theatrical flourishes are there in the kidney-shaped pond, outlined with abalone shells and surrounded by 140 different types of aloe, to the dramatic planting en masse of golden barrel cactus, ribbon-like weeping euphorbias and dragon trees lining Lotusland’s main drive.

You can see her knee-deep among the floating lotus flowers and waterlilies in the Water Garden and reflected in the big chunks of blue-green slag glass Madame used to line the pathways of the Blue Garden. Here, the plants are a hazy, silvery shade of grey-blue, mimicking the very real gemstones Walska collected in her lifetime. Indeed, the million-dollar sale at Sotheby’s of some of her best jewels in 1971 helped fund the last garden Madame would ever create, one filled with rare cycads, including the now-extinct-in-the-wild variety of South African Encephalartos woodii. 

138
candelabra tree (*Euphorbia ingens*) and golden barrel cactus. OPPOSITE PAGE: Parodia magnifica on the main drive.
THESE PAGES the Cactus Garden by landscape designer Eric Nagelmann.
Today, Lotusland is not only a reminder of Walska’s glamorous past but also a model of pioneering, sustainable gardening for the future, nurturing precious endangered plants for repatriation into the wild. It is also home to an impressive collection of more than 300 different species of cacti, donated by Walska’s long-term friend Merritt Dunlap. Even Australian flora gets a generous nod, with eucalyptus, Queensland kauri, bottle and grass trees, bunya and hoop pines, and lacy tree ferns dotted throughout the gardens.

Naturally Lotusland itself — including the newly renovated Japanese garden, first created in the 1960s and celebrated with a star-studded gala in July this year — continues to be as elegant and beguiling as the woman who conjured it over half a century ago. “With our continued stewardship,” says Stauffer, “Lotusland can give the world a place of inspiration, healing, wellness and tranquillity.”

lotusland.org; images from Australian Dreamscapes by Claire Takacs (Hardie Grant Books, $70).

“She went beyond what any garden designer would have dared to do”
Gwen Stauffer

THIS PAGE: the Topiary Garden features 26 animals as well as chess pieces and geometric forms.

OPPOSITE PAGE: succulent baskets designed by Ganna Walska hanging from a coast live oak on the Great Lawn.
abalone shells surround the border of the pond in the Aloe Garden. Opposite page: looking from a brick pathway in the Aloe Garden into the kidney-shaped pond.

“No average person could possibly create a garden that is as spectacular, extraordinary and timeless as this.”

Gwen Stauffer