

Come To Your Senses

By Stephanie Levin-Gervasi

American Way - Sojourns

On the southeast side of Golden Gate Park, cloistered from San Francisco's mercurial climate, grows a living museum devoted to the senses. The Strybrig Arboretum's Garden of Fragrance, a treasure chest of olfactory surprises, sets the most indifferent nose quivering.

Dedicated to the visually impaired, The Garden of Fragrance opened in 1965. With plants chosen for their texture, aroma, and flavors, the half-acre garden houses seventy-five to 100 species of plants. Posted signs and Braille plaques identify each plant by genus and species. Fragrances shift with the seasons, wafting between delicate lavenders, cherished for their perfume, to natural insect repellents such as the Mexican marigold.

Yearly, a million visitors wind past the hip-high limestone wall protecting the garden. The wall, like many of the plants, has Mediterranean roots. The stones came from a thirteenth-century Spanish monastery. William Randolph Hearst intended an exact replication of the monastery, but before he could piece together history, a mysterious fire destroyed the plans that identified where the stones were to be placed. Today, the charred rejects are bound by weeping moss.

Odors, textures, and legends vary in paradise. The plant brushing your leg is probably St. John's wort. Blooming around St. John's birthday, its delicate yellow flowers bruise easily. Above the apostle's namesake grows the bay laurel tree, whose leaves are used for cooking and in ancient Roman times were made into wreaths for athletes and scholars.

For a panoramic feast of the senses, stop at the garden's loop. Sit for a moment and listen to the water. Exotic aromas from the Silk Road, and medicinal secrets native to other, older worlds, will keep you company.

The Garden of Fragrance is open weekdays, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; weekends and holidays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Daily tours of the Strybrig Arboretum and Botanical Gardens at 9th Avenue and Lincoln Way are at 1:30 p.m., and there's an additional 10:30 a.m. tour on weekends. Admission is free. (415) 661-1316.