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CULTURAL HERITAGE IN BOTANIC GARDENS



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CELEBRATING CULTURAL BELONGING AND HERITAGE AT SAN DIEGO BOTANIC GARDEN



San Diego Botanic Garden celebrates cultural belonging and heritage near the US-Mexico border in a region that hosts vast biological and cultural diversity. Three of the spaces that were designed, installed, interpreted and operated in true partnership with local community partners are the Indigenous (Native American), Mexican, and Medicinal Gardens. Curated plant selections, a multilingual self-guided tour app, interpretive signage, and interactive programming engage and inform guests about diverse human connections with plants and the cultural humility with which the spaces were crafted. A sense of belonging and understanding is created through the intentional design and implementation throughout.

San Diego Botanic Garden designs spaces and programs that engage audiences in exploring human relationships with plants. This work is grounded in cultural humility and a commitment to amplifying voices of underrepresented communities. More than 30 themed gardens engage visitors with plants from various geographies, including California, the Mediterranean basin, Mexico, and South Africa, as well as plants of cultural significance such as those used for food, medicine, and other traditional practices. These gardens invite multisensory exploration through hearing, seeing, smelling, and, where appropriate, touching and tasting. Among the most popularly engaged spaces are the Local California Native American Garden, Mexican Garden, and Medicinal Garden. A community-engaged design approach integrates thoughtful plant selections, docent-led tours, multilingual interpretive signage, a GPS-enabled self-guided tour app, and dynamic programs that celebrate cultural diversity. Guests are encouraged to learn about culturally significant plants and their uses, and to form personal connections with them that enrich their appreciation of both biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Above: Participants in the February 2025 Gathering of Tribes and Conservation Organizations, including representatives from about 25 Indigenous Native American Nations, seven Indigenous-led organizations, and 25 conservation groups, academic institutions, and government agencies at the Local California Native American Garden (Native Plants and Native Peoples Trail) at San Diego Botanic Garden (San Diego Botanic Garden)



The San Diego region is a biocultural hotspot among the 36 global biodiversity hotspots and is home to the most federally-recognized Indigenous Native American tribal nations of any US county, including the distinctive Cahuilla, Lipay ~ Tipay Kumeyaay (Diegueño), Kuupangaxwicheh ("Cupeño"), and Payómkawichum ("Luiseño") peoples. San Diego is further shaped by diverse naturalized and immigrant populations, particularly communities of Mexican heritage due to the nearby Mexico-US border. Guests come to connect with plants important to their own cultural heritage or to learn about others. San Diego Botanic Garden builds and maintains reciprocal relationships with community partners, supporting ongoing collaborations and mutual knowledge exchanges to advance the organization's goal of creating, sharing, and applying plant wisdom in our world. The vast biological and cultural diversity here uniquely position San Diego Botanic Garden to foster intercultural dialogue that deepens understanding, builds mutual respect, and develops a sense of belonging for individual guests and entire communities.



"Lahunt" Richard Bugbee, the late Luiseño tribal elder and ethnobotany instructor from Kumeyaay Community College, instructing local school children circa 2000 on the construction of "ewaa" traditional shelter structures taken in the Local California Native American Garden (Native Plants and Native Peoples Trail) (San Diego Botanic Garden)

San Diego Botanic Garden is entrusted by Indigenous partners to convey an allowed segment of their knowledge and culture through intentional ongoing partnerships grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared stewardship.



A Sharing in Cultural and Medicinal Plant Knowledge public educational program with Indigenous knowledge holders, traditional medicine practitioners, and plant scientists leading classes, discussions, and hands-on herb blending workshops to raise awareness of the importance of medicinal plant biodiversity (San Diego Botanic Garden)

The garden strives to innovate replicable models that other organizations can adapt and implement while creating vital place-based experiences with their own native flora, Indigenous cultures, and local communities.

People using the GPS-enabled self-guided tour mobile app to learn about medicinal plants throughout the Garden with curated information that is delivered both audibly and visually in English and Spanish (San Diego Botanic Garden)

San Diego Botanic Garden is entrusted by Indigenous partners to convey an allowed segment of their knowledge and culture through intentional ongoing partnerships grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared stewardship. The Garden acknowledges and honors the foundational roles and monumental contributions of “Lahunt” Jane Dumas, the late chairwoman and tribal elder of Jamul Indian Village of California (A Kumeyaay Nation), and “Lahunt” Richard Bugbee, the late Luiseño tribal elder and ethnobotany instructor from Kumeyaay Community College, who philosophically guided the organization down a path of meaningful sustained partnerships with Indigenous communities. With initial funding from the Donald C. and Elizabeth M. Dickinson Family Foundation, the Local California Native American Garden (colloquially the Native Plants and Native Peoples Trail) officially opened in 2000. This space was designed, installed, interpreted and continually operated since the late 1990s with local Indigenous community partners, especially Jamul Indian Village of California. Interpretive signage here relays a clear message from Indigenous people: “This is who we are, and we are still here”. Plant labels include Kumeyaay names and selected ethnobotanical uses that Indigenous partners have chosen to share publicly. This garden highlights rich native biodiversity, including manzanitas, oaks, toyon, and yerba santa, while emphasizing the deep relationships between people, plants, and place. Jane, Richard, and other Indigenous people have led intergenerational and cross-cultural events and programs for over 25 years here to share their distinguished perspectives and understandings of the natural world with community members and guests.

Garden staff, volunteers, and local community members of Mexican heritage, including secondary school students, created the Mexican Garden in the early 2000s with funding from the US Institute of Museum and Library Services. This Garden demonstrates the rich biodiversity of Mexico, including agaves, peppers, and new world cycads, and has fun design elements to help connect guests with Mexican culture and create an atmosphere of belonging. This garden was installed and officially opened in 2005 by pre-existing Fruit and Herb Gardens to celebrate the botanical and cultural heritage shared through foods, especially in Mexican tradition. Guests here learn about the origins of foods and spices that are often unspecified when sold as groceries. One well-known plant in this garden is hoja santa (*Piper auritum*), which is used in traditional Mexican cooking and holiday festivities such as Las Posadas and Christmas. Since it officially opened in 2005, the Garden has regularly hosted cultural events that reflect Mexican traditions, creating opportunities for pluralistic community celebrations alongside cross-cultural learning.



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- [In the Mexican Garden, ballerina and mariachi topiaries near a tile fountain are crowd favorite sights that connect guests with cherished aspects of Mexican culture through plants \(San Diego Botanic Garden\)](#)



Since conventions and laws regarding biodiversity exchange can limit the community's ability to access some plants from Mexican cultural heritage, the Garden provides guests with the opportunity to experience them responsibly while learning about the importance of ethical sourcing and international conservation efforts.

The creation of the Medicinal Garden was enabled in the early 2020s by the establishment of San Diego Botanic Garden's Medicinal Plants Research Consortium, which brought together representatives from academia, industry, non-governmental non-profits, and Native American Tribal government agencies to partner in conservation, education, and scientific inquiry. Funding for this development came primarily from the local Conrad Prebys Foundation. Practitioners of traditional medicine here and across the world, including Indigenous knowledge holders, contributed to the intentionality of expanding the living plant collection and designing the Medicinal Garden and educational programs to engage and inform guests. Interpretive signs, plants, and programming here celebrate the cultural diversity of traditional knowledge and the history of medicinal plant use from time immemorial through present, including but not limited to Ayurveda, Native American cultural practices, and Traditional Chinese Medicine. Since many medicinal plants are at risk from overharvesting globally, the importance of biodiversity conservation taught here includes both its ecologically intrinsic value and its relevance to human health and wellbeing. The Medicinal Garden also serves as a learning space for students and researchers at local colleges and universities, supporting hands-on education and the formation of new relationships between people and plants.



Ethnobotany students from California State University San Marcos learn about the past, present and future connections between traditional medicinal knowledge and modern scientific advancements (San Diego Botanic Garden)

The San Diego Botanic Garden Medicinal Plants Research Consortium, including representatives from academia, industry, non-governmental non-profits, and Native American Tribal government agencies, meets in 2022 to plan for the new Medicinal Garden, expanded medicinal plant collection, educational programming, and scientific research studies

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By bridging Indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary research methods in biochemistry, botany, and pharmacognosy, the Medicinal Garden affirms the value of multiple ways of knowing and encourages holistic understandings of plant science.

Curated living plant collections, thoughtfully designed thematic areas with interpretive signage, and interactive programs at San Diego Botanic Garden offer authentic ways for guests to engage with their own cultural heritage and others, fostering belonging, dialogue, and meaningful knowledge exchange. As part of the American Public Gardens Association, Botanic Gardens Conservation International, and other invaluable conservation networks, San Diego Botanic Garden strives to innovate replicable models that other organizations can adapt and implement while creating vital place-based experiences with their own native flora, Indigenous cultures, and local communities. The design, installation, and operation of the Local California Native American, Mexican, and Medicinal Gardens in true partnerships with cultural humility demonstrate a successful approach to elevating underrepresented voices and strengthening communities. These approaches align with broader regional educational efforts, including community college programs that integrate ethnobotany and place-based learning, further improving connections between academic institutions, cultural knowledge holders, and public gardens. Learners begin to understand that biodiversity and cultural diversity are deeply interconnected, and that ongoing Indigenous ecological practices such as tending, burning, and harvesting are part of long-standing sustainable systems of reciprocal relationships between people and plants. San Diego Botanic Garden is honored to connect and inform many communities and organizations to advance plant conservation, ethical knowledge exchanges, and true sustainability.



The 2024 San Diego Botanic Garden Medicinal Plants Research Symposium, hosted in the Dickinson Family Education Conservatory, celebrates many ways of knowing and studying plants including traditional culture, modern biochemical research, and especially highlighting Indigenous knowledge sovereignty (San Diego Botanic Garden)

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