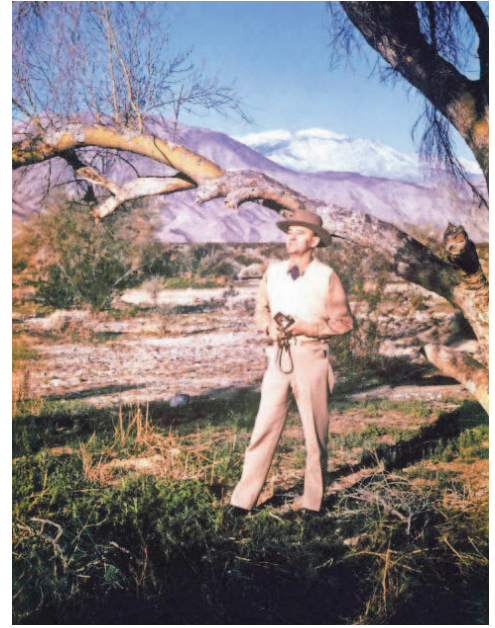




Devil's Garden offers a view of Mt. San Jacinto. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



The first mayor of Palm Springs, Phil Boyd, stands at the site of what is now The Living Desert.

The rich history of desert gardening

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

"I'm an enemy of the average" stated world-famous Polish singer, socialite, and six-time-married Madame Ganna Walska, who certainly wasn't average.

In 1941 at the age of 58, Walska purchased a sprawling Montecito estate and spent the remainder of her long life cultivating the 37-acre property she named Lotusland.

Fascinated by desert plants, Walska created a stunningly beautiful desert garden at her Santa Barbara home that rivaled other spectacular landscapes seen up and down California in the first half of the 20th century.

Another notable early desert garden was developed for the California Pacific International Exposition in San Diego.

Even today, the 1935 Cactus Garden contains some

of the largest cactus and succulent specimens in Balboa Park.

In San Marino, near Pasadena, railroad magnate Henry Huntington's extravagant gardens complemented his even more fabulous art collection.

The Huntington Desert Gardens, covering 10 acres on the several-hundred-acre property, is unparalleled in the world. Featuring towering mounds of golden barrel cacti among the more than 5,000 species of succulents and desert plants from fabulously distant climes and this garden is now nearly a century old.

But all these remarkable desert gardens were nurtured in the temperate Mediterranean climate of coastal California. Hard at work cultivating gardens in the sand dunes and heat of the Coachella Valley during those same early years were brave, determined gardeners.

Nothing about desert gardens or gardeners was average.

Early settlers of Palm Springs found naturally oc-

curing clusters of native plants and gave them imaginative names, like The Devil's Garden, a level area near Whitewater north and west of Palm Springs.

It is described in J. Smeaton Chase's "Our Araby" as an open desert mesa, "natural cactus garden, where many species of cacti are associated in what amounts to a thicket of the odd vegetable forms." (He also noted that the trip from the village of Palm Springs over to see Devil's Garden would take three hours on horseback.) Chase specifically subtitled his book "Garden of the Sun" in deference to the remarkable landscape.

Imagine the astonishment of early visitors to this area upon seeing the odd forms of cacti, the bright pink of bougainvillea or the burst of orange and yellow that comes with a blossom of Poinciana, Mexican bird of paradise. Perhaps fearful of losing his own paradise, in the foreword to the book Chase sets out his purpose: "to invite people of the right kind—not too many—to a

See **DESERT**, Page 28A

Desert

region that is meant for the discerning few..." meaning the decidedly non-average.

At the end of the 19th century, Dr. Welwood Murray assiduously cultivated the sandy desert soil and fought off the bud-blasting winds to produce early-ripening fruit to send to the coastal markets. The first few visitors from the East Coast staying at his 1896 Palm Springs Hotel were delighted by the abundance of citrus and vegetables available just for the picking.

As new settlers arrived, the pioneer McKinney family astutely sold cactus, agave and palms along with building supplies for new homeowners eager to adorn their yards.

Chester "Slim" Moorten purchased Stephen Willard's house in the mesa neighborhood of Palm Springs and set to work creating a mysterious and glorious garden. In the shop, they made a career and international reputation by selling unusual specimens and cultivating curiosities for visitors.

Moorten's wife, Patricia, was trained as a botanist at University of Southern California and was considered the ultimate authority on desert horticulture. Today, their son Clark carries on the tradition.

Melba Bennett, founder in 1955 of the Palm Springs Historical Society, was a wealthy socialite who was equally comfortable attired in a couture ball gown or in dungarees working in her garden.

Her little tome, the "Palm Springs Garden Book," was presented by the Garden Club to share their members' collective experiences with the difficult job of cultivating the desert. It is illustrated with little sketches done by Bennett who also wrote that the book was to be "a Primer for the desert gardeners."

Come Join Us!

The Ritz Carlton Cast & Plow in Marina del Ray to celebrate Nini's 52nd birthday, Friday June 22nd at 5:30 p.m.



Pat Moorten stands in the Moorten Botanical Garden.

An introduction to a 'sport' which demands no expensive costing, which is easier on the temper than golf or tennis, which can be held to a minimum of expense and effort by the introduction of native drought-resistant plants, or can develop into a purse-taxing luxury, and muscle-developing hobby if you become an addict."

The desert was indeed home to a good supply of addicted, un-average gardeners. Neel's Nursery provided them the plant material for decades and Earl Neel provided local blooming color with a twinkle in his eye and a ready smile.

By 1970, banker, developer and first mayor of Palm Springs, Phil Boyd was prescient about the coming resort development of the valley floor founding The Living Desert to preserve a swath of natural open space and desert flora. As it happened, Neel's Nursery on Sunrise Way in Palm Springs ultimately made way for development.

Desert gardening required a certain faith and persistence, stubbornness and delight in the subtle. Thanks to dedicated gardeners, the cultivated desert in the aggregate holds its own place in the panoply of stellar California gardens, showcasing unique and spectacular possibilities afforded by the southwest climate. And the results are certainly not average.



Welwood Murray in his palm-shaded garden. PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



The Palm Springs Hotel features a large cactus garden.