

# DESCANSO

Spring – Summer 2023



The Lilacs  
of Descanso

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# A Garden Worth Celebrating

by Juliann Rooke, Executive Director



Recently this email came across my desk: "This morning I noticed that we have officially, successfully introduced *Astragalus brauntonii* into the native wildflower field...This species is highly endangered, a SoCal endemic, and one of our most attractive local/rare plants in my opinion... I honestly believe this is a really big deal and something worth celebrating."

This is worth celebrating. An endangered species has found a home at Descanso and the team here knows how to nurture and care for it. (The email, by the way, came from Frank Obregon, a Descanso Horticulturist.) The *Astragalus brauntonii* is growing here because we gave it the right environment to grow in and it will thrive because we will continue to do so.

This is about stewardship, which you will be hearing us talk a lot about in the coming years. Stewardship is the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care. I - in fact, the entire staff - take this very seriously at Descanso. The gardens are looking to the future and adapting as our planet and climate changes.

Another example you can read about in this magazine is happening with the lilac collection. While it is one of the oldest collections here at Descanso, it too is an opportunity. We are currently propagating new lilac plants in the nursery - our new facility that opened last year. Propagating plants is like having children, you never know what qualities you may get even when you know the parents well. Some of these new lilac species could be breeds that need less water or can tolerate higher temperatures. We will only know by nurturing them and seeing what they grow into.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention all the other beautiful blooms coming to the garden this spring. The tulips, cherry blossoms, and California natives will all be putting on a show. Along with the natural beauty coming to Descanso, you will also see the return of some of our favorite programs like Cultivate and summer music with a twist. Both will be featured during regular daytime hours, which will be expanded to 7pm this spring and summer.

*I can't wait to see you in the garden. I hope you join us in celebrating spring.*

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*At Descanso Gardens,  
we connect people with  
nature and one another.*

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# Breeding Descanso Lilacs: What's Old is New Again

By Frank Obregon, Horticulturist

The 1950s and 1960s were a horticultural heyday for Descanso Gardens. A plantsman named Walter Lammerts had been hired and created unique roses, camellias, and lilacs for Manchester Boddy's new business at Descanso. By utilizing Descanso's famously wide variety of lilacs, Lammerts was able to cross-pollinate select flowers, produce hybrid seeds, and grow out seedling plants which were much better suited to Southern California's climate than any of their parents.



Lammerts' hybrid lilacs were vigorous and incredibly tolerant of heat compared to their Eastern-European ancestors, and the plants quickly gained attention and respect in the nursery trade as something totally new: "Descanso Lilacs." To this day, "Descanso Lilacs" are widely regarded as the lilacs for gardeners outside of areas with extremely cold winters, and these lilacs are among the most impactful and important contributions Descanso has offered to the national and international horticultural trade.

While attempts were made by the likes of John Sobek to continue and build upon Lammerts' lilac breeding program at Descanso, sadly, by 1970 all breeding work with the Descanso Lilacs had been abandoned. Although there was no breeding program in the '90s, there was a very dedicated group of lilac volunteers, led by volunteer lilac curator Rudy Schaffer, who worked hard to clean up and maintain the Descanso Lilac Garden. Lilac breeding

at Descanso would suffer 50+ years of neglect before recently being "resurrected" and restarted thanks to the work of Autumn Ayers, Diana Nightingale, and myself (Frank Obregon). Since 2020 we have been identifying the remaining historic Descanso Lilac varieties on site, collecting their seed, carefully pre-treating the seed for successful germination, and then growing out the seedlings in the Ruth Borun Nursery and Prorogation Center for evaluation. By utilizing Darwinian "survival of the fittest," only the most well-adapted seedlings are kept long-term and only the truly exceptional plants will be given the title of "Descanso Lilac." By doing this work, we are allowing the next generation of Descanso Lilacs to grow and progress their family lines in ways their parents cannot, thus securing our lilac collection into the future. As an example, as the climate shifts ever warmer and drier, new and even harder varieties of Descanso Lilacs will be needed to replace the less heat-tolerant and less



vigorous varieties of yesteryear. As of this writing, almost half of the historic Descanso lilac varieties are included in our modern breeding program and more are added every year. Soon I will begin facilitating hybrid crosses between heirloom Descanso Lilacs and other, more modern heat-tolerant varieties. Additionally, we are currently sourcing seeds of wild lilac species from international sources as a means to expand the overall genetic base of our lilac breeding program. By increasing the diversity of the seedlings we raise, we are increasing the adaptability of the next generation of lilacs—and increased adaptability

means an increased chance of long-term success in an increasingly unstable future.

We are building directly off of the work left to us by Lammerts and Sobeck 60+ years ago, and I believe the current future of Descanso Lilacs is brighter than it has ever been. We are hoping to see the first new forms, traits, and flower colors emerge from our re-started lilac breeding program as soon as spring 2023, and I expect new lilac varieties will start coming out of the Descanso nursery within the next 18–24 months. Stay tuned!



# Get to Know Some of the Descanso Lilacs



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Chiffon'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Dark Night'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Angel White'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Descanso Giant'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Lavender Lady'



Syringa  
'White Cloud'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Forrest Kresser Smith'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Sylvan Beauty'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Descanso King'



Syringa vulgaris  
'Blue Pixie'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'Guild's Pride'



Syringa × hyacinthiflora  
'California Rose'

Image: Kimberly-Ann



# There is Something for Everyone in the Garden

by **Vanessa Pierce**, Education Programs Manager

As a new year begins, I am excited to share the upcoming programs we have planned at Descanso Gardens. Our wide variety of classes are not only fun and informative but also support our mission to connect people with nature and one another. Keep an eye out for horticulture classes like “Seed Collecting Basics” and others throughout the year. Children’s programming will also come back, starting with a once-a-month “Little Explorers” program, which offers themed arts and crafts, storytime, and other fun activities. These are great for children two to five years old and their caregivers.

We will celebrate our famous camellia collection in February with beautiful displays, tours, and activities, along with a series of poetry programs called “The Camellia Connection: Our Rebirth of Wonder.” Curated by accomplished poets Amy Uyematsu and Peter Levitt, poets

from around the Los Angeles area will come together to share poems about nature, remembrance, and renewal.

March through May — as our gardens reach peak spring blooms — our horticulturists will lead monthly guided “Spring Blooms Tours.” Each month they will focus on a different area of the gardens, from the lilac garden to the rose garden, depending on what is in bloom. For the more artistically inclined, our four-week art class in March is a great way to capture the beauty of the gardens with the stroke of a pen.

Finally, April through August, we will have monthly Cultivate, a family-friendly event during our extended hours. Each month we will explore new themes with guided tours, nature activities, and fun DJ sets. I can’t wait to see you in the garden at one of our wonderful upcoming programs!



# Upcoming Events

For a full list please visit [descansogardens.org](http://descansogardens.org)

## The Camellia Connection: Our Rebirth of Wonder

Celebrate camellias and poetry throughout the month of February at Descanso Gardens.

Camellias bloom in our coldest and darkest winter season. With the return of camellia blossoms each year, our wonder also blossoms. These brilliant flowers, native to Asia, contain stories of remembrance, connection, and renewal. Descanso supports one of the largest collections of camellias in North America, with more than 3,500 known and recorded plants, representing 600 varieties.

In collaboration with accomplished poets Amy Uyematsu and Peter Levitt, Descanso is pleased to offer a series of programs that invite exploration, reflection, and participation.

### Poetry Reading

**Saturday, February 4 | 2–3:30pm**

Poets from around the Los Angeles area come together to share poems about nature, remembrance, connection, and renewal. Moderated by author and historian Naomi Hirahara, and featuring poets Traci Kato-Kiriyama, Ramon Garcia, Mike Sonksen, Pam Ward, and Elena Karina Byrne. Free with admission. No advance registration is required.

### Haiku Walk & Workshop

**Saturday, February 11 | 10:30 am–noon**

Led by haiku poet Debbie Kolodji, this workshop will include time to walk in the garden and be inspired by the camellias and instruction on writing the traditional Japanese three-line poem. Free with admission. No advance registration is required.

### Camellia Connection Activity

**Saturday, February 4 – Sunday, February 26  
10am–4pm daily**

Garden Guests are invited to choose from an assortment of poems and take it with them as they walk through the camellia collection. Free with admission. No advance registration is required.

## Member Bird Walk

**Sunday Feb 26 & March 26 & April 23  
8am | Courtyard**

Come join this guided bird walk for members. Bring your own binoculars. Free with membership. No registration is required

## Spring Tours

**March 17 & 18, April 21 & 22  
11am–noon | Center Circle**

Join us for a guided walking tour and see what's blooming at Descanso. Meet at Center Circle.

## Member Appreciation Week

**March 13–19**

Special surprises all week.

## Cultivate

**April 14 | 4:30–7pm**

Come see what happens in the garden during extended hours. Take a tour, dance to music amongst the flowers, learn about nature and enjoy food and drink. Grab some friends and enjoy the gardens in a new way.

## Earth Day California Blooms Display

**April 18 - 23 | El Portal, California Gardens**

View a floral Display that celebrate the beauty of California native plants.



# *SHIKI: The Four Seasons in* Japanese Art Brings this Beauty and Harmony to the Garden

by **Cristeen Martinez**, Director of Guest Experience

In California the seasons are subtle. So subtle, in fact, that some claim there are none at all. Just as subtle, and equally beautiful, are the exquisite designs of the seasons in Japanese art. Over centuries, a rich literary and visual vocabulary representing the seasons evolved from the aesthetic sensibilities of the Japanese people. This lexicon celebrates the sensual appeal of elements of the natural world but also fills them with human emotions. The aesthetic values of Japan reach beyond philosophical ideas about art and beauty, they are embraced as a way of life, centered around the concept of living in harmony with nature. As a result, the seasonal motifs found their way into everyday life, embellishing clothing, accessories, and other objects used daily.

*SHIKI: The Four Seasons in Japanese Art* brings this beauty and harmony to the Sturt Haaga Gallery on February 18. This exhibition from the Scripps College collection in Claremont, features common seasonal motifs, from a bowl with wisteria blossoms gracing the interior to maple leaves embellishing a kimono. Natural elements like these are frequently stylized to heighten the ornamental effect when used as decorative motifs. This modest, refined simplicity is regarded as the highest form of beauty.

The four seasons have also played a central role in traditional Japanese poetry. *Waka* is a form of poetry that was practiced by members of the Imperial Court around the 7th century AD. Meaning “Japanese song,” *waka* has several forms, including the short poem or *tanka*, consisting of 31 syllables arranged in five lines of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. In the 17th century, the shortest poem of all was created – the more universally known *haiku*, comprised of three lines of 5-7-5 syllables. “In all of these, natural and seasonal imagery have reigned supreme, imbuing these short verses with not only the beauty of nature but also the mood and sensibilities long associated with the natural realm,” states curator Meher McArthur. *SHIKI* will present

poetry alongside artifacts and artwork illustrating the importance of nature in the everyday lives of the Japanese.

Along with poetry and artifacts, more traditional forms of art are included in the *SHIKI* exhibit. Woodblock prints and hand-painted folding screens brought the natural world into the home, too, with the images chosen to match the seasons. While the upper classes rarely experienced the natural world firsthand, artfully painted and gold-leafed screens allowed them to enjoy a cool river landscape in the heat of summer.

Printed works known as *ukiyo-e*, or “pictures of the floating world,” made the work of famous artists affordable and therefore popular with the general population. These printed images also helped spread the visual vocabulary among common people. Not only do the motifs represent seasons, as the lotus signifies summer, but they also include emotional characteristics relating to the natural cycle. A symbol of purity, the lotus is revered for its ability to rise from muddy waters and bloom into a beautiful flower. It also symbolizes finding meaning in life, from the Buddhist tradition.

Augmenting the exhibition, programs will include Gallery tours and talks along with hands-on activities to engage families and individuals in the process of creating.

*SHIKI: The Four Seasons in Japanese Art* has been curated by Meher McArthur. Ms. McArthur is an Asian art historian specializing in Japanese art. She was Curator of East Asian Art at Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, CA, Creative Director for the Storrier Stearns Japanese Garden, Pasadena, Academic Curator for Scripps College, Claremont, and Art and Cultural Director for JAPAN HOUSE Los Angeles. The mission and programs of the gallery are sustained by an endowment from Heather and Paul Haaga.



*Tale of Genji: Murasaki and Genji Enjoying the Snow*  
 By Utagawa Kunisada (1786-1864) and Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858)  
 Japan, c. 1854  
 Full-color woodblock print



*Chrysanthemums and Stream*  
 By Ohara Shoson (active 1877-1945)  
 Japan, c. 1926  
 Full-color woodblock print



*Vase with Cherry Blossoms and a Willow Tree*  
 By Ando Jubei (1876-1956)  
 Japan, c. 1912  
 Cloisonné enamels on metal



*Cranes, Bamboo, Camellias and Snow*  
 Japan, late 19th or early 20th century  
 Paint and gold leaf on paper mounted as a two-panel screen



Long-sleeved Kimono (*Furisode*) with Maple Leaves  
 Japan, 1920-1940  
 Crepe (chirimen) silk with stenciled designs



*Footed Bowl with Camellia*  
 By Tomitaka Ohta, Japan, c. 1990s  
 Koishiwara ware, glazed stoneware



*Comb with Fans and Chrysanthemums*  
 Japan, 1930s-40s  
 Paint with mother-of-pearl on plastic

**SHIKI:**  
*The Four Seasons*  
*in Japanese Art*  
 Sturt Haaga Gallery  
 February 18 – May 21

# Some Unusual Tulips

by **David Bare**,  
Director of Horticulture

At Descanso we plant an average of 30,000 tulips annually for what is arguably our biggest floral show of the year. In Southern California, it does not get cold enough for tulip bulbs to initiate their flowers. Tulips need 10 to 12 weeks of chilling in order to bloom in the spring, so we have them pre-chilled before shipping. This demands quick planting, or the moist chill will cause them to start to mold. There is always a bit of a crush to get the bulbs in the ground and the show underway.

When Chris Medvitz designed Enchanted Forest of Light, our holiday light installation, he was inspired by our planting to create Flower Power, a bed of illuminated tulips whose colors transform in hypnotic waves. The largest bed we plant is the same bed where Enchanted stages their Flower Power display, a nod to the real thing. While the technicians are pulling up the electric flowers we are fast on their heels composting, raking, and digging in the tulip bulbs.

It is always a back-breaking day or two to get the bulbs in the ground, but with the help of volunteers and staff from throughout the garden, it gets done quickly enough. We plant spring annuals and biennials on top of the tulip bulbs a few weeks later. This gives us a succession of flowers when the all-too-brief tulip flowering is over.

I like to order the tulips in the heat of August, allowing plenty of time for the bulbs to be pre-chilled and shipped. Having been at this for 8 years, there are some varieties I will always include in my order. 'Temple of Beauty' is one, a tall single late tulip, salmon-colored and suffused with a rose blush. 'Sorbet,' white with a flare of scarlet emanating from its base also has a permanent spot on my list.





But horticulture has a tradition of celebrating the weirdos. Over the centuries tulip flowers have developed streaks, fringes, points, and folds, through viruses, mutations, and intentional breeding. Parrot tulips are among the most exotic if not downright bizarre. They have mostly developed as mutations of other varieties and often feature pleats, folds, and incurved edges. 'Flaming Parrot' is a red and white streaked, folded, and fringe-edged version of the above-mentioned 'Sorbet'. 'Frozen Night' is almost black, a deep maroon-purple. 'Parrot King' is a lovely combination of gold, orange and yellow with brushstrokes of green. 'Super Parrot' is an ivory white with pea green highlights. The individual petals of each of these are works of art in themselves.

Lily-flowered tulips are slender and graceful. The flowers have a distinctive "waist" from which the pointed petals flare out, unlike the rounded form of most tulips. We often plant 'Aladdin' which is scarlet with a yellow edge to

the petals, but there is not a lily-flowered tulip that does not deserve growing.

Viridiflora tulips are among our latest blooming. The name means green flowered and they all bear distinct green midribs to the petals. 'Flaming Spring Green' is a Viridiflora I plant every year. It is white with red strokes over a green base.

We will wind up our tour of the weirdly beautiful with a flower that looks like it could bite you, the fringed tulip. The petal edges are broken into sharp, ice crystal-like patterns, the result of a mutation. They tend to be short and you will want to admire them up close so plant them in a spot where you can readily examine them. 'Fabio' seems to be the crowd favorite here. It is orange with a jagged yellow edge. The peak of tulip season at Descanso is typically mid to late March here at Descanso. We hope to see you.



# Deepening Connections with the Garden

by **Somer Sherwood-White**, Director of Advancement

At Descanso Gardens, we connect people with nature and one another. One way we foster this connection is by inviting our members to support this special place by becoming involved beyond their annual membership. As we start the new year, I am so thankful to those who support Descanso Gardens – they are the reason we are a world-class garden. As much as I am looking forward to 2023, I would be remiss if I did not look back at 2022. Last year there was so much to celebrate and two highlights were the Your (Un)natural Garden gala and Enchanted Forest of Light preview party.

What a beautiful evening. On September 24 as the sun was setting, guests arrived at the Hilltop Garden for An Unusual Gala, set against the backdrop of the Your (Un)natural Garden exhibition. As guests gathered in the Boddy House garden they enjoyed cocktails and a tour of the exhibition. They then moved to the back terrace, where gem-colored tables were waiting. Chef Richard Mead presented a farm-to-table dinner. Dancing and desserts rounded out the evening. Proceeds from the gala provided essential support to Descanso and our mission.

Just two months later, hundreds of guests joined us at the Enchanted Preview Party, where they enjoyed drinks, food, and entertainment from the California School of the Arts San Gabriel Valley (CSArts-SGV). Along with the young musicians, one highlight is always the Living Lighted Vines, ethereal creatures that seem to emerge from somewhere deep in the garden and add an extra layer of specialness to the Symphony of Oaks.

Funds raised at these events support our programs and make a lasting impact on Descanso Gardens – helping us to care for our collections, to provide programs throughout the year, and to connect tens of thousands of school kids to nature. Perhaps our most engaged group of supporters is the Center Circle Associates. Through their annual membership donations, they provide important philanthropic support of Descanso’s mission. Members of this group are invited to after-hours talks, tours and opportunities to engage with the experts on our staff.

From deep dives into our collections to previews of projects coming soon to Descanso, there is plenty for Center Circle Associates to discover. Coming up in 2023 for Center Circle Associates:

- Preview nights of new exhibits at the Sturt Haaga Gallery
- Tours of our collections with members of our horticulture team
- Special presentations on the future of Descanso, with presentations on our Master Plan and upcoming projects
- A behind-the-scenes tour of Carved
- After hours garden events with wine and hors d’oeuvres

And more! There is at least one opportunity per month in 2023 to deepen your engagement and connection to Descanso Gardens as a member of Center Circle Associates. I hope you will join us.



## Upgrade to Center Circle Associates

Enjoy these premium benefits as a member of the Center Circle Associates:

- Additional free daytime admissions when accompanied by a member
- Complimentary guest passes
- Invitations to after-hours events, talks and tours
- Additional discount in the gift shop

And more! Join online at [descansogardens.org](http://descansogardens.org) or contact the Development Office at (818) 952-4391 or [development@descansogardens.org](mailto:development@descansogardens.org)

To find out more about event sponsorships and other support opportunities, please contact the Development Office at (818) 952-4391 or [development@descansogardens.org](mailto:development@descansogardens.org)

Top row: Fun was had by all at the Enchanted preview party. Middle: Enjoying the Unusual Gala are Hope Tschopik Schneider and Executive Director Juliann Rooke; David Gonzalez, Shirley Luong, Lola Kelly, Lovell Holder, Alex Esola, Daniela Kende Ploszek, Pete Ploszek, Kristy McCarthy, Ian McCarthy; Adam Schwerner and Stephanie Diftler. Bottom: Adam Pierce, Katherine Harvey, Andy Lantz, John Pearson, Ann Murphy, Peter Murphy, Juliann Rooke. Photos by Jack Fabricius and Martha Benedict.

Descanso Gardens

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a show this spring!

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