

Sunnylands Center and Gardens

Rancho Mirage, CA

Pioneering a new ecological aesthetic for arid landscapes in the southwest, Sunnylands Center & Gardens is a nine-acre desert jewel amid Rancho Mirage's conventional, thirsty sprawl.

The new Interpretive Center and Botanical Gardens celebrate the cultural legacy of publisher, diplomat, and philanthropist Walter Annenberg and his wife Lenore, whose adjacent 200-acre estate has long been a retreat for U.S. Presidents, foreign dignitaries, and celebrities. Working closely with Mrs. Annenberg, OJB created a collection of museum-quality garden spaces that invite discovery and reflection.

Organic and free-flowing at the edges of the site, the lines of hardscape surfaces and planting beds take on a geometric precision adjacent to the Center. Located past a gracious entry drive and formal auto court, Frederick Fisher and Partners' 15,000-SF LEED Gold-rated building houses exhibition space, a cafe, a theater, and a gift shop. The Center's western windows frame a breathtaking view over an event terrace and lawn to the 10,000-foot-high San Jacinto Mountains beyond. To the right and left of the terrace, twin reflecting basins mirror the expansive desert sky, lower the ambient temperature, and fill the area with the relaxing sound of water. More than 1.25 miles of walking trails lead visitors past the circular event lawn, beneath flowering palo verde desert trees, to a labyrinth garden, a performance circle, and interpretive displays of native plants.

The planting design features 53,000 hand-picked specimens from over 50 arid-landscape plant species chosen for their sculptural character, seasonal interest, and wildlife habitat value. Cutting-edge water efficiency measures throughout the site allow the garden to thrive using only 20% of its water allocation from the Coachella Valley Water District.

Client

Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands

Size

15 acres

Dates

2007 - 2011

LEED

Gold

Team

Architect: Frederick Fisher + Partners
Civil: MSA Engineering
Structural: Leo Parker Engineering
MEP: G&W
Lighting: HLB Lighting Design
Irrigation: Sweeney & Associates
Water Feature: CMS
Signage/Wayfinding: Reich + Petch
Exhibit Designers: Hillmann & Carr, Litwak Group

Awards

ASLA National Design Award
ASLA San Diego Design Award
Architectural Foundation of Los Angeles (AFLA)
Design Award













The sculpted gardens east of the center cascade into a two-acre spread of desert wildflowers.









The Interpretive Center blends a modern aesthetic with the rich beauty of the Sonoran desert surroundings.





Nestled in a grove of Hybrid Mesquite, the labyrinth offers an opportunity for quiet reflection.







The landscape architecture and the project's cutting-edge approach to sustainable design and management take inspiration from the desert environs. The project's landscape architect, Jim Burnett, describes the approach as 'intelligent beauty,' which celebrates rather than ignores the arid climate.

- Rachel Berey, Topos Magazine











Sustainability

The project redeveloped a degraded site and restored the ecological conditions while being mindful of the Sonoran Desert. The native planting palette includes species carefully chosen for their sculptural qualities, texture, and seasonal colors.



LAND

The project creates a habitat for threatened and endangered species, including cottontail rabbits, jackrabbits, desert iguanas, monarch butterflies, hawks, and vermilion flycatchers.

A series of erosion control strategies were implemented, including geotextiles to stabilize the soils and plants for root stability.

A pre-design site assessment informed the soil strategy, allowing the project to create a soil management plan with protected zones, conserved soil, and amended soil.



PLANTING

53,000 arid landscape plants were used including 70 different plant and tree species.

Annual planting was avoided.

617 trees were planted.

The seeds were locally sourced and adapted for the California Climate.

Fertilizer and pesticide use was minimized.

Low water usage planting was used on-site.



SOCIAL

Sunnylands was envisioned as a place for foreign dignitaries and diplomats to gather for summit meetings and retreats in a relaxed setting and it boasts a star list of visitors.

The project provides buses during major events, preferred parking spaces for ride sharing, and electric vehicle parking.

The project provides optimum site accessibility, safety, and wayfinding.

The center offers various educational programs, including garden walks, yoga classes, programs for families, a speaker series, and a rotating art exhibition.



WATER

66% permeable surfaces on the site. The project utilizes just 20% of the water allocation from Coachella Valley Water District.

The project uses 100% on-site stormwater retention.

High-efficiency capillary irrigation zones are independently controlled by soil and moisture sensors to reduce water use.

The user experiences stormwater features through garden paths which integrate grading, planting, water capture, and water storage.



CARBON, ENERGY & AIR

Geothermic system with 96 wells uses a closed-loop temperature transfer to heat and cool the center.

300 clear and sunny days allows for solar energy capture in the photovoltaic fields.

The trees sequester 72,000 pounds of carbon annually, which offsets 8.9 cars per year **

The project uses regional material.

Vegetation was used to minimize energy by being placed around the building.

*The tree average for water interception is 500 gallons. American's use an average of 100 gallons of water per day (EPA's water trivia facts).

**120 pounds of CO2 per tree annually (This number is based on an average from the National Tree Benefits Calculator) One car produces an average of 8,320 pounds of CO2 per year (The Code of Federal Regulations - 40 CFR 600.113).