

## Conservatory of Flowers recreates Golden Gate Park in miniature

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Contra Costa Times

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THE GOLDEN GATE Park Band is playing a rousing piece while just down the way, the park's bison are chowing down, snorting and bellowing an occasional observation.

Next to the bandshell, the carousel spins to the sounds of lively organ music. In the distance, the foghorn on the Golden Gate Bridge wails mournfully as the clock on the Ferry Building chimes the hour. The Rose Garden is in glorious bloom, and the bamboo of the Japanese Tea Garden captures the breeze, swaying gently as a train rumbles by.

This is Golden Gate Park and San Francisco as you've never seen or heard it -- fully accessible in just a few steps, and bursting with sights and sounds.

The staff and volunteers at the Conservatory of Flowers have launched an all-new garden railway display that celebrates the park's 140th anniversary. The park, as well as the most recognized neighborhoods of San Francisco, have been re-created and re-imagined in miniature. While not to exact scale, the display offers glimpses of the park's better known monuments and buildings, and tests the viewer's skills of observation.

"We thought it was appropriate to pay homage to the park," says Lau Hodges, director of operations and exhibitions.

Beyond a salute to the park, the display also combines three diverse topics: model railroading, recycling and the Conservatory of Flowers' favorite subject, plants. The display also may reveal parts of the park that even the most

dedicated visitor may have missed.

"So many people visit the park every year and most of them don't know a lot about it," Hodges says. "We're hoping all of the out-of-town, out-of-country and locals will take some of that home with them."

Most of the buildings and monuments were created by James Sellier, an extraordinary model builder the Conservatory staff calls "the artist in residence at the dump." Sellier uses castoffs to create his models, so such things as old piano keys, plastic forks, rulers, plastic tubes from cash register tapes, chess pieces and light fixtures become architectural delights.

Part of the challenge for observers is figuring out just what things used to be. They fit so seamlessly into the finished models that you might not recognize the plastic foam containers and taper candles that were used to create the Portals of the Past, the entranceway to A.N. Towne's Nob Hill mansion that somehow escaped the 1906 earthquake and fire and now stands as a tribute to the city's strength and perseverance. Or the old television tube, rotisserie and wooden rulers that comprise the Dutch Windmill.

### Signature San Francisco

The display builders, led by Hodges, have taken some liberties. A lake, complete with geese and turtles sunning themselves on rocks, is a

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combination of Stow and Spreckels lakes. But the scope of the display takes viewers from McLaren Lodge, the park's headquarters, past the Conservatory of Flowers, the park's first building, all the way to the windmill and the Golden Gate Bridge.

Brent Dennis, director of the Conservatory of Flowers, calls the park and accompanying cityscape displays "signature San Francisco," reflecting the city's history, its environmental concerns and its passion for nature.

"There are a lot of garden railroads," Dennis says. "The trains are the attraction, but here, it's how they are integrated into the garden that is just spot on. I'm so proud of the staff."

According to [gardentrains.com](http://gardentrains.com), G-scale, or outdoor garden railroads, represent the fastest growing area of model railroading. They have become very popular with gardeners, who use them as another way of adding whimsy or interest to their yards. This is the third year the Conservatory of Flowers has installed a garden railway, but the first year that the staff has designed and installed it all on its own.

The designers were particularly focused on detail. The model bison grazing in the Bison Paddock are covered in hair taken from the actual herd. The pioneer log cabin was built from sticks and twigs found around the cabin.

## Sounds of the park

And adding to the realism is the sound recordings and the choice of plants, which will be changed twice during the display's run to reflect first the holidays, then spring and summer.

Andrew Roth was in charge of finding and recording the dozens of soundtracks that play throughout the display. The sounds put visitors in the center of

each vignette. At a fire station, dispatchers call out emergencies. On the top of Telegraph Hill, the parrots chatter. The Ferry Building chimes each quarter hour.

Roth recorded the Golden Gate Park Band playing five pieces, the bison's snorting and grunting, the conversation of ducks, geese, sea gulls, sea lions and other creatures. The crews at the Golden Gate Bridge cheerfully sounded the bridge's foghorn on a clear day so that Roth, dangling microphones over the railings, could capture the sound.

Chinatown, in the San Francisco city neighborhoods display, sizzles with the sounds of Chinese New Year. At the Exploratorium, children make music with a variety of unique instruments.

Collecting the sounds has been an adventure, says Roth, who is excited to help bring the park and city to life. In some cases, he was the first to officially record the music of the city. The bridge didn't have archival recording of its foghorn, and the band had never been recorded other than by its conductor.

So with the buildings, monuments and sounds taken care of, it fell to lead landscaper Mario Vega to fill in what might be the most important element of the display -- the hundreds of plants.

## Landscape miniatures

More than 60 boxes of California-grown moss cover the base for the railroad tracks and the park's hills and dells. Vega and his team then had to find passable replicas of the park's diverse horticulture, but in miniature.

Some were easy. Miniature roses fill in for the originals in the Rose Garden, and dwarf bamboo works in the Japanese Tea Garden.

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"Our first stop was the Golden Gate Park nursery," Vega says, "and we looked for plants with small leaves."

The stand-ins, paired with the miniatures and the G-scale trains and trolleys, create a remarkable facsimile. Dwarf conifers pass for redwoods, Christmas cactus fill in at the Queen Wilhelmina Tulip Garden, and tiny cactus specimens re-create the Arizona Garden.

Early next year, Vega says, some of the plantings will change out. Miniature bulbs will herald spring, and dwarf azaleas will re-create summer in the park.

The chore now is keeping everything healthy. The plants are all in pots, hidden in the mossy landscape, and must be watered by hand every day. And it needs to be done with care to avoid damaging all of the electrical elements and the buildings. Gardeners also can't use fertilizer, which they learned causes the railroad tracks to oxidize.

In a park 140 years old, a little rust is expected, but that's one thing the Conservatory of Flowers skipped in this miniature version.

## If You Go

**What:** Third annual Conservatory of Flowers Garden Railway

**When:** 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, now through March 13

**Where:** Conservatory of Flowers, 100 John F. Kennedy Drive, Golden Gate Park, San Francisco  
**Cost for San Francisco residents:** \$5 general admission; \$3 for youths (12-17), seniors and students with identification; \$1.50 for children (5-11); free for children 4 and younger. **Cost for non-residents,** \$7 general, \$5 for youths (12-17), seniors and students with ID; \$2 children 5-11; children 4 and under are free

**More information:** Call 415-831-2090 or go to

<http://www.conservatoryofflowers.org>

**Extras:** Conductor for the Day program for children. Conductors receive a whistle and engineer's hat and get the chance to start the Garden Railway trains that day. A \$50 donation to the Conservatory is required. For more information, contact the development associate at [eedelson@scof.org](mailto:eedelson@scof.org) or call 415-577-2584.

## Golden Trivia

Here are 10 things you might not know about San Francisco's Golden Gate Park:

1. The California Academy of Sciences has been called the "greenest building in the world," earning a platinum rating. The roof is 2.5 acres of sod with California native plants.
2. The park's carousel was originally built in Buffalo, N.Y., in 1912 and was installed at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island. It was given to the park in 1941.
3. The Conservatory of Flowers is the oldest building in Golden Gate Park.
4. The dahlia is the official flower of San Francisco. The Dahlia Garden, located just east of the Conservatory of Flowers, is at its best in August and September.
5. The San Francisco Botanical Garden has approximately 8,000 species of plants from five continents of the world, all grown outdoors.
6. The first fortune cookie was created and served in the Japanese Tea Garden in 1914.
7. There have been bison in the park since 1891; they moved to their current paddock in 1899.
8. The Rose Garden offers free rose cuttings to the public when the bushes are pruned on the first Saturday of January.
9. The Dutch Windmill at one time was able to pump 20,000 gallons of water per hour to the reservoir on top of Strawberry Hill. About 10,000 tulip bulbs are planted each year at the Wilhelmina Tulip Garden.
10. The Fuchsia Dell was planted in 1940 with

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## fuchsias from the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition.

All the buildings and locations mentioned here have been replicated in the Conservatory of Flowers' Garden Railway exhibit.

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