

FALL 2024/WINTER 2025

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

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A new chapter for the garden



I am excited to announce the lake restoration, stormwater capture, and Nature Discovery Garden projects. Over the coming years, you will see these projects come to life and become excellent additions to the garden. You can read about what to expect as construction begins on the pages of this magazine, but behind the scenes, we have spent years preparing. Getting a Master Plan approved in 2020 to start construction has taken a whole team, including staff, volunteers, donors, and many more. I am constantly grateful for all the energy and support Descanso has.

And this is just the beginning. The future projects outlined in the Master Plan will continue to unfold over the years, enhancing the Descanso experience while preserving its unique character.

A place for joy

We opened the new Descanso Railroad in July, and it's already a favorite of visitors. Every time I'm out there, I see children and adults marveling at the model trains as they glide by. In the garden, we have many opportunities for discovery, and I'm so happy to add this experience where families can come and find joy and happiness.

Pardon our dust

I'm going to say that a lot over the next few years. Right now, I am asking you to excuse the dust and work in the Courtyard. Van de Kamp Hall is currently being renovated to become Farmhouse at Descanso Gardens. Chef Richard Mead of Farmhouse at Roger's Gardens will helm this farm-to-table dining experience. Stay tuned for opening dates.

I'm so excited to share these updates with you and hope to see you in the garden.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juls". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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On the cover: Photo by Jax Borrego. Read more about the photographer on page 15.

Descanso Magazine is published biannually by the Communications Department. For comments please email pr@descansogardens.org.

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Embarking on a new vision

A lake restoration, stormwater capture and reuse project, and Nature Discovery Garden propel Descanso into the future

The lake restoration project will create a thriving habitat in the garden.



Ensuring the spirit of Descanso for future generations

*by Jennifer Errico
Director of Communications*

Descanso has been completing projects from our Master Plan for a few years—starting with the Descanso Railroad, Membrane Bioreactor, Ruth Borun Nursery and Propagation Center, and soon, Farmhouse restaurant—but this fall, we will begin our most extensive construction to date with a lake restoration and Nature Discovery Garden. We will also embark on one of Southern California’s most innovative water projects.

“More people are seeking experiences in nature, and Descanso is the place they’re coming to,” said CEO Juliann Rooke. “We want to grow and accommodate our visitors but do it purposefully, with an eye toward sustainability and preserving the character of the gardens.”

Descanso is more popular than ever. Visitation has increased from 250,000 visitors

annually in 2013 to almost 1 million in 2023. Although it’s a welcome change, the exponential visitor growth has stressed facilities, operations, collections, and programming. Along with the increase in visitorship, the garden has also been adjusting to increasing temperatures, intense rains, and changing seasonal weather patterns. It was time to devise a plan for navigating into the future.

The Master Plan, approved by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in 2020, is a roadmap. It is divided into phases that stretch over a decade. Phase one includes the construction of the nursery, restaurant, railroad, lake, water treatment area, and Nature Discovery Garden. Future phases include a redesigned parking lot, a tree canopy walk, and a new Rose Garden pavilion, just to name a few. In all, there are 13 garden projects, two new buildings, and five building updates.

All these projects will be funded through private and public grants and donations.

The lake, water system, and Nature Discovery Garden projects have begun and will be completed by 2027.

It’s all about water

California’s economy and culture have always been influenced by water availability, whether abundant or scarce. Californians have water on our minds—nowhere more than here at Descanso. Between record-high temperatures and record rainfall, how we use and conserve water will ensure the health of the garden.

Descanso Gardens’ ambitious water reclamation program and lake restoration project will drastically reduce the gardens’ reliance on purchasing water. The water project is projected to cut the annual water budget through innovative stormwater capture and reuse initiatives.

“No other garden in the nation has a project like this,” said Rooke. “With this transformative project, we’re safeguarding our precious water resources and creating a haven for wildlife.”

“No other garden in the nation has a project like this,” said CEO Juliann Rooke.

The lake will be restored and the Nature Discovery Garden will be constructed on the hillside above it. This rendering shows the new garden and accessible boardwalk around the lake.



This is how the project works: Water will be harvested from the Winery Creek Channel at the north end of the gardens, filtered, and delivered to an underground cistern (located in the current auxiliary parking lot). It will then be available for use in the lake and for irrigation. Water runoff from the auxiliary lot will also go into this system.

This is not the first time Descanso has been at the forefront of water technology. Visitors to the gardens see the Membrane Bioreactor (MBR) in the southeast corner of the parking lot and may wonder what it is. The MBR allows the

garden to take wastewater, filter, treat, and clean it for irrigation. Our facility is the only one of its kind at a garden in Los Angeles County, making Descanso a leader and a model for water use throughout the region. Currently, only wastewater from the Courtyard area is cleaned by the MBR, but all wastewater will be directed toward the system as new projects come online.

Every project in the Master Plan was conceived with sustainability in mind. The MBR and stormwater capture project are just the beginning. Descanso Gardens is setting a new standard for botanical gardens with innovative water

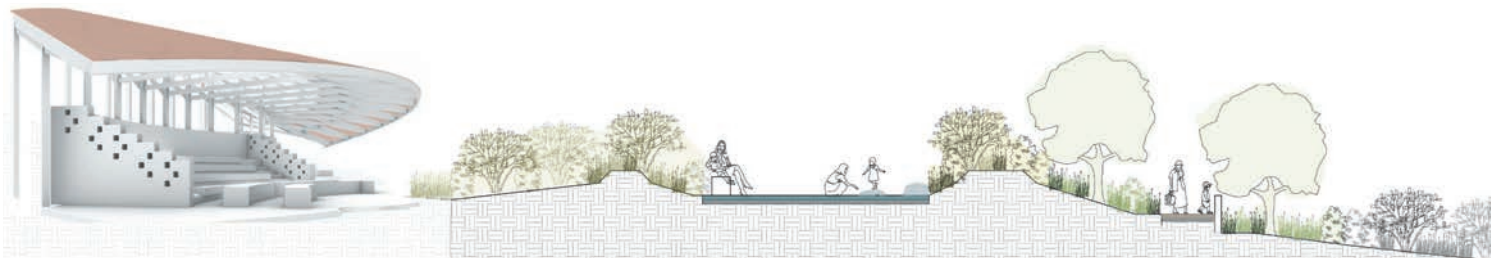
management strategies built into everything we do.

A lake that belongs here

The lake is a very special place for visitors. Many spend time there watching for birds and other animals. It is a great place to relax and walk. But the lake has been doing poorly in recent years. The water that fills it is inconsistent, duckweed has taken over (that's why it looks so green), and the concrete liner is in disrepair. A new plan will fix the lake and make it a thriving environment for wildlife.

The lake has undergone many transformations over

FEATURE



the years, all influenced by the amount of water available. Descanso Gardens' beloved lake has struggled. The water sources that fill it are inconsistent and have caused soil and sediment to collect. This has led to stagnation and the growth of highly invasive and pervasive duckweed, which essentially removes all oxygen from the lake during the summer.

"Our lake is not healthy," said Rooke. "Although we have made some improvements over the years, technological advancements have only recently caught up and will allow us to do what is necessary for the long term."

The existing lake has more than six feet of silt on the bottom from years of drainage from the hillside. All of that

will be removed, and the lake will be restored—the two current lakes will become one. Regrading the lake will create sediment bays to collect the runoff. These can be emptied and will help prevent the lake from filling up with silt once again. The lake will also get a new clay liner and aeration to ensure its health.

What will happen to the wildlife? Experts tell us that the birds and turtles will relocate and that there are most likely few fish left in the lake due to the duckweed problem.

The lake is one of the most important habitats in the garden, and this was a very important part of how the new lake was designed. All the changes focus on creating a thriving habitat for native flora and fauna. The lake

plantings, from the garden to the shoreline to the wetlands, were redesigned with California natives in mind. The floating wetlands, featured later in the magazine, provide nesting and foraging grounds for various bird species.

The lake rejuvenation includes an ADA-accessible path around the perimeter, a bridge that spans the water, an observation terrace, and interpretive signage to ensure all visitors enjoy the new area.

Learning to love nature

The Nature Discovery Garden is the lake's sister project. Located on three acres behind the lake, it will offer an interactive, immersive garden experience built to engage all the senses. It also answers one of visitors' most common questions: What is there to do with children?

"Time in nature is essential for young children. Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked to the development of imagination, a sense of wonder, independence, and autonomy, powers of observation, and feelings of connection to the

California's economy and culture have always been influenced by water availability, whether abundant or scarce. Californians have water on our minds—nowhere more than here at Descanso.

The Sensory Garden will include areas for discovery, left, and a new learning pavilion, below.



world,” said Emi Yoshimura, Chief Operations and Administration Officer.

“In addition, children’s positive encounters with nature support growth into adults who value and protect it,” she said. The new garden area will welcome seasoned naturalists and those who are still building comfort with green spaces to play, climb, jump, listen, explore, and enjoy a whole host of sensory experiences.

The Nature Discovery Garden includes four areas designed for various natural interactions. Cascade Canyon will be a water learning area

with a dry creekbed, an interactive water feature, and plenty of opportunities to learn about water in the foothills. The Chaparral Challenge is designed for curiosity and adventure and has climbing opportunities and digging zones. The Woodland Discovery area features quiet zones. The Sensory Garden will be a place to learn about native plants and includes a learning pavilion for programs and groups.

“We want the Nature Discovery Garden to inspire the next generation of nature lovers by giving them a place to interact and explore at

Descanso,” said Rooke. “We can’t wait to welcome them into this new area.”

A plan for the future

Over the next ten years, Descanso will embark on many projects that will make sure the gardens are here for years to come. The lake and Nature Discovery Garden are just the beginning. As the projects are completed, visitors will see changes to all areas that will result in water efficiency, and adaptation to the warming climate, all while preserving Descanso’s history. 🌱

New area, classic tree

by David Bare
Director of Horticulture and
Garden Operations

When the lake restoration began to look like it would happen, the first thing we tackled was marking the trees. Autumn Ayers, our plant records manager, and I worked in ever-widening circles from the lake shore and into the future Nature Discovery Zone. We made a few interesting discoveries, took home some spider webs and burrs, and unfortunately alarmed our guests with all our multicolored ribbons tied to the trees. Logically, everyone interpreted the marked trees as slated for removal when we were actually designating the opposite.

I was happy to hear so many folks voice their concern about an area they love and want to protect. We share a desire to protect what we have and enhance it for the future,

In terms of ecosystem value, oaks have an extremely high rate of hosting more species of insects than any other plant. Essentially, oaks translate to a healthy and dynamic food web.

including creating space for humans and improving habitats for wildlife.

So many options

Our explorations in the field identified three primary trees: sycamores, willows, and oaks. All of these play an important role in supporting wildlife, but none more so than oaks.

There are around 600 *Quercus* (oak species) worldwide and 90 in North America. *Quercus* is the largest tree genus in the northern hemisphere and has the largest geographic range of any tree species. In terms of ecosystem value, oaks have an extremely high rate of hosting more species of insects than any other plant. More insects mean more birds, lizards, and other predators on up the food chain. Essentially, oaks translate to a healthy and dynamic food web.

Descanso is known for its beautiful oaks, which form the

property's foundation. So, when it comes to new tree planting, oaks are, first and foremost, large and small. Below are four species we are planning to use. Some are simply expansions on trees that thrive here already. Others have been used as single specimens, and we look forward to using them more extensively.

More than just a scrub

Quercus berberidifolia, the California scrub oak, is one of several botanically confusing species that grow naturally in this area. A quick perusal of the literature and you will see that everyone agrees that this species is a taxonomic nightmare. On top of all the name changes and juggling, it morphs freely and hybridizes readily. Leave the taxonomy for the botanist and enjoy this plant's unique character. All the oaks that get scrunched up into this confusing group are called "scrub oaks," an unfortunate name for species of considerably lesser stature than our canopy of *Quercus agrifolia*, the coast live oak. *Q. berberidifolia* can be 100 years old and only 15 feet tall, and often has a bonsai-like quality.



*The beauty of Descanso
is found in its oaks.*

We share a desire to protect what we have and enhance it for the future, including creating space for humans and improving habitats for wildlife.

Scrub oaks thrive along the borders of the future Nature Discovery Garden and lake. They seem to me to be an undiscovered gem at Descanso, and they can be found throughout the area, particularly on slopes and hillsides. The leaves, like all things on scrub oaks, are variable but often have the appearance of a miniature holly. They'll very gradually get up to 10 feet tall, so are always more shrub than tree. Chaparral is derived from the Spanish 'chaparro,' meaning 'place where scrub oaks grow.' As a chaparral plant, this species is fire-adapted and usually has several trunks originating from a base that may have burned back many times over the years. We believe several of our scrub oaks are hybrids from a complex of species. I encourage you to seek out our extant specimens. One is among our finest trees, but it is miniature.

An adaptable oak

Quercus chrysolepis canyon live oak, is another on our list. This tree is often cited as being one of the most far-ranging and morphologically variable of all the California oaks. It commonly presents as a multiple-trunked specimen with evergreen leaves

that are thick and oblong and may have margins that are smooth, spiny, or toothed and up to 4 inches long. To add to the confusion, leaf margins are usually spiny in young trees and smooth in older ones, but often both are present on the same tree. Canyon live oak should be adaptable to our site, thriving from "foothills to desert mountains and sea level to 4,000 feet."

This one is formidable

The valley oak, *Quercus lobata* grows extensively on Manchester Boddy's original water source for Descanso, a steep stream-carved valley. It is a beautiful tree bearing the iconic lobed leaf that many of us think of as oak, as seen in so many commercial graphics. They are, however, quite tiny, two to four inches compared to the similarly lobed eastern white oaks at up to 9 inches. Valley oak is reputed to be the world's tallest and most massive oak," according to *Oaks in the Urban Landscape*, a University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources guide.

Natural populations of valley oak have been greatly reduced


because the trees prefer deep, fertile soils, which support successful agriculture.

A Descanso favorite

The coast live oak, *Quercus agrifolia*, is the dominant tree in Descanso. Its gnarly swooping branches compose a complex canopy that forms the backbone of our garden. We love these trees and only want more of them, but they will definitely be a component of all our new projects. Readers of this newsletter hardly need an introduction to these beautiful trees whose branches can soar upward to 80 feet or engulf the viewer in a dense skirt that flows to the ground.

The "Pasadena" oak

The last of the new oaks is the Engelmann oak *Quercus engelmannii*, sometimes called the Pasadena oak. It is a slow-growing, smaller oak with a spread that is generally wider than its height. We have a fine small one just to the right of the visitor's center. Its beautiful blue-green color, small rounded leaves, and open habit make it one of my favorite garden trees. It has the smallest natural distribution range of any California mainland oak.

It will be nice to add to our oak collection and bring in some new specimens to experiment with. With their diversity in form, habitat, and size, we should find a great spot for all these new additions. 



WHAT ABOUT THE BIRDS?

It's for the birds

*by Jennifer Errico
Director of Communications*

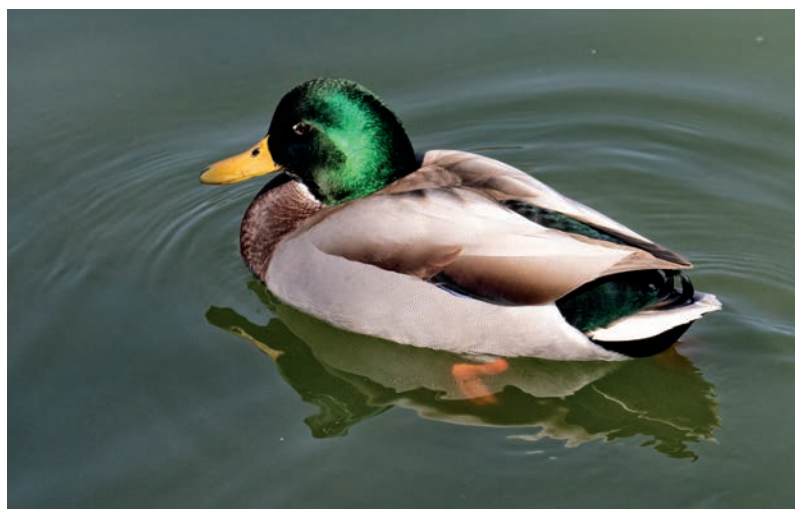
David Weeshoff is standing at the bird observation station just as he has for more than 17 years. He's looking at the lake and talking to visitors who wander by. When he spots a bird, he offers his binoculars for a look. The visitors marvel at ducks making their way across the lake and phoebes swooping close to the water, trying to get a bug meal.

Today, a pair of large unusual blackish ducks are on the lake. "Where did they come from?" Weeshoff, Vice President of the Pasadena Audubon Society, asks. The mallard hybrids are a mystery. Weeshoff explains that various hybrids occur, and perhaps these two are part Muscovy duck that met somewhere and then ended up in our lake at Descanso. To Weeshoff, this displays the importance of having a healthy lake in the garden.

The story of the lake at Descanso is a story of water. As the water sources have changed and the amount of water in the lake has fluctuated, the birds that visit have done the same.

Weeshoff tells the story, starting with when he began observing at Descanso in the 1970s. At that time, the lake had ample water, and the birds were abundant. Wading birds, including herons and egrets, could be found on the shore, catching frogs and fish. Migratory birds, like the Canadian geese and a variety of ducks, moved through seasonally. The habitat also supported nesting birds.

All that changed over the years as the lake infrastructure failed. By 2019, the water level, along with higher temperatures and drought changed the lake. It became almost stagnant and,



Photographer David Weeshoff has captured many birds on the lake including, from top left, the bushtit, oak titmouse, mallard, and a great egret with a snowy egret.



in recent months, covered in duckweed and algae. The water levels ebbed and rose, and the birds started disappearing.

“That’s just the way of birds,” Weeshoff says. “They go to where the habitat supports them.”

One of the most common questions about the lake restoration is: What will happen to the birds? The answer is that they have been leaving for a long time. When construction begins, they will relocate. And they will slowly return, in abundance, when the lake project is completed.

The new lake project includes a consistent and reliable water source through stormwater capture. Even in a drought year, we can capture up to 13 acre feet of stormwater. Aquatic life, such as native fish, insects, and plants that support birds and other animals, will return. There will be ample food

foraging areas and floating wetlands that can serve as nesting sites, shelter, and breeding grounds. There will also be places where migratory birds can rest and replenish their energy before continuing their journey.

The lake project is slated to begin by the end of this year, with the draining of the water, and will be completed by 2027. The birds will begin arriving soon after.

“They will come back,” says Weeshoff, “if you build it, they will come.” 🌿

Floating wetlands are a critical component of a healthy lake

The new lake design will include an island, but this isn't just any island; it's an island that displays Descanso's innovative approach to the future.


The new island, which functions actually as floating wetland, is made of interlocking platforms constructed using 100% recycled and recyclable materials. It is covered with coconut fiber. The use of sustainable materials not only enhances the island's functionality but also minimizes its environmental footprint.

Once the lake is restored (sometime in 2027), the state-of-the-art 1,500-square-foot wetland will help create natural habitats and clean water.

Descanso is home and a migration stop for 195 bird species, 82 of which were identified in the Wildlife Management Plan conducted by England Ecology. With the floating wetlands, the lake area will be a thriving habitat for waterfowl and water birds, such as Canada geese, American white pelicans, American wigeons, and great blue and green herons. This positive impact on the wildlife and waterfowl is a testament to the importance of the project for the Descanso ecosystems.

Water plants will be planted directly into the island and offer a place for animals to rest, but below the water flourishes a "micro-wilderness" of submerged roots where fish can thrive. It is also where microorganisms

can live to break down harmful substances, filtering pollution from the water.

The island is just another way Descanso is working to make sure the plants and animals that count on us, continue to thrive. 



A new perspective

by Seema Sundaresh
Education/Programs
Coordinator, Partnerships and
Community Engagement

Last March, I met Jax Borrego as they were visiting Descanso Gardens to photograph the pre-construction phase of the lake and Nature Discovery Garden (NDG) projects. While walking through the gardens, we discussed how they use art to “preserve the evolving world.”

Borrego, who describes themselves as a “first-generation, queer photographer who was born and raised in Northeast Los Angeles,” was the first of five Las Fotos Project’s Creative Entrepreneurship Opportunities (CEO) students to participate in this documentation project.

Las Fotos Project is a Boyle Heights-based organization whose mission is to “elevate the voices of teenage girls and gender-expansive youth from communities of color through photography and mentoring, empowering them to channel their creativity for the benefit of themselves, their community, and future careers.” In collaboration with Las Fotos Project, five CEO students will be invited to



Photo by Jax Borrego

explore their visual storytelling skills through photographing the lake and NDG projects. The goal is to photograph everything from changes in the landscape to animal and human interactions.


Helen Alonzo Hurtado, Las Fotos Project’s Social Enterprise Director, said that the project will feature a different student documenting the same locations for each construction phase.

“This project is special because we will get a view into each photographer’s artistic style and what they find interesting,” said Alonzo Hurtado.

This is not the first time Descanso Gardens has collaborated with Las Fotos Project. Previous collaborations have included workshops in the gardens and exhibits in the Boddy House, including *Your*

(Un)natural Garden and the ongoing *L.A.’s Garden*.

Alonzo Hurtado said she likes bringing Las Fotos Project students to Descanso Gardens because she visited the gardens with her family as a child and now gets to share her personal connection with her students.

“Many students express wanting to practice nature photography, so it’s nice to bring them to outdoor spaces that are so close to their homes,” said Alonzo Hurtado. “Getting into nature is important for students. In a society that is on the go and obsessed with production, it helps them slow down; it’s healing to be in the gardens.” 

Light it up

Carved

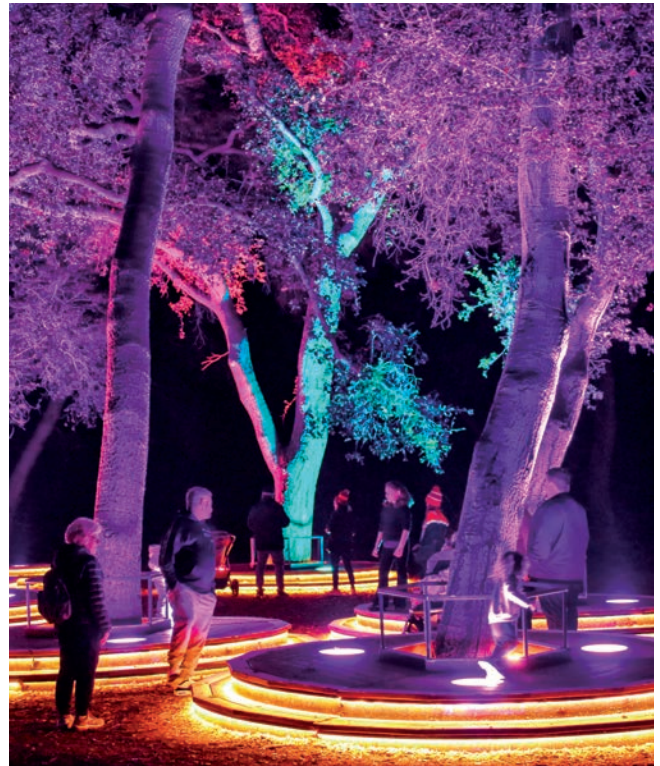
Get ready for a “gourd-geous” experience with the return of Carved, running from October 4-30. This year promises to be more spectacular than ever, filled with delightful surprises and captivating displays that enchant visitors of all ages.

New this year is the Beer Garden on the Main Lawn, where visitors can enjoy drinks and bites, explore the hay maze, and snap photos at the pumpkin house. The model trains of the Descanso Railroad will also be running and lit up for the occasion.

A special treat awaits as Chainsaw Jenna from Frizzleburg, Pennsylvania, brings to life a family of wood spirits carved from five enormous logs, adding a touch of playful mischief to the event. Tickets are on sale now with special discounts for members. Find out more at descansogardens.org.



Enchanted



Spend an evening of wonder in the garden when Enchanted Forest of Light returns. When night falls, the gardens are changed into a wonderland of lights and surprises. For the first time, the model trains at Descanso Railroad will be part of Enchanted. Enjoy the whimsy of the trains, then stroll past the electric tulips to the Rose Garden. Be mesmerized by the art of Hybycozo, wander through the oaks with their canopy lit up with purples and greens, and be in awe of the illuminated ancient forest.

Continue or create a holiday tradition with family and friends. Take a night to relax and enjoy. Enchanted runs nightly from November 17 – January 5. Members get ticket discounts. Find out more at descansogardens.org.

DONOR PROFILE

Love at first bloom

Roberta Liao and Chris Rivas fell in love with the garden right around the time their daughter was born and became members after their first visit.

Creating lasting memories

Milly doesn't remember, but her parents say that she "grew up" at Descanso. In the past 14 years, visits to the gardens have gone from stroller walks to solving the mini hedge maze to Descanso Discovery Camp and Carved and Enchanted.

"We are so lucky to live near such a gorgeous yet low-key oasis," the family said.

Now Perennial Circle members, an esteemed group of the garden's most devoted patrons, the family enjoys events they describe as fun, educational, and diverse, and Milly has developed a passion for Descanso's art exhibitions.

Excitement for the future

Roberta and Chris said they are surprised at how much was planned at Descanso and are especially excited about the upcoming Nature Discovery Garden. Roberta added, "We are glad that kids will have even more opportunities to learn and have fun here."

When asked why they support the gardens so generously, they replied, "Descanso is a special place, and we cannot think of anything quite like it in Southern California . . . We respect Descanso's commitment to preserving the natural beauty of the Southern California foothills."

For more information about supporting Descanso Gardens, please visit descansogardens.org.



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