

SUNSET MAGAZINE DEMONSTRATION DESERT GARDEN
(Sunset Garden)
2021 North Kinney Road
Tucson
Pima County
Arizona

HALS AZ-18
HALS AZ-18

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

SUNSET MAGAZINE DEMONSTRATION DESERT GARDEN (Sunset Garden)

HALS NO. AZ-18

Location: 2021 North Kinney Road, Tucson, Pima County, Arizona.

The garden is located fourteen miles west of the city and sixty-nine miles north of the Mexican border within the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum in the Tucson Mountain County Park.

Geospatial Coordinates:

Latitude: 32.242814, Longitude: -111.166717 (Northeast corner of tensile structure, Sunset Garden, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: The *Sunset Magazine* Demonstration Desert Garden (Sunset Garden) was envisioned as an experiment to explore the design and practicable possibilities of using native plants in a contemporary home setting. At the time it was constructed, most southwestern gardens mimicked those of the eastern United States. The imported style often included water-intensive vegetation and green lawns. The goal of the Sunset Garden was to illustrate how xeric native plants could be used to create a regionally appropriate outdoor space. It also served as a testing area for plants not yet commonly used in Southwestern landscaping. As a result of its success, Arizona nurseries began to produce native plant species for home gardens.

The Sunset Garden is part of a larger post World War II cultural phenomenon of magazine-sponsored design, of which the Case Study houses sponsored by *Arts and Architecture Magazine* are perhaps the best known. Noted architects and landscape architects created model houses and gardens that were to serve as models for the general public.

Tucson landscape architect Guy Greene, whose work was featured in the *New York Times*,¹ the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Architectural Record*, and Time-Life books,² as well as in *Sunset Magazine*, designed the garden. It was completed in three sections, in 1963, 1969 and 1972.³

Description: *Overview*

¹ "Private Swimming Pools Now Within Reach of Moderate-Income Families," *The New York Times*, June 20, 1959.

² Blake Morlock, "Landscape Designer had Jobs Worldwide," *The Tucson Citizen*, June 6, 2003.

³ "A New Demonstration Desert Garden." *Sunset Magazine*, May 5, 1963, 117.

The garden is composed of three linked areas defined by topography, geometry and use of materials. Parallel stairs and ramps connect the garden segments. All three sections provide shelter from the desert sun by means of ramada structures or tree canopy. As a demonstration garden, each individual segment contains a unique range of materials and vegetation.

Completion of the three segments took over a decade. The upper garden was completed in 1963, the middle garden in 1969, and the lower garden, usually called the Mexican Garden, in 1972. While the overall structure of the space and large vegetation was intended to be fixed, shrubs and smaller plants were to be replaced as new cultivars became available.

Upper Garden

Most visitors approach the garden from the pathway leading south from the museum entrance. The garden entrance, marked by a group of large boulders from the surrounding Tucson Mountains, leads off to the west. A curvilinear path leads southwest past an original formed concrete pot (2'-6" high) into the upper garden, dropping sharply down under a hyperbolic paraboloid ramada, a tensile structure of poured reinforced concrete. During rain events water is collected from this roof to drain into a small pond below. The pond is accented by the same kind of boulders that define the entrance to the garden, although these are somewhat smaller in scale.

The ramada dominates the first section of the garden by framing views of the other sections and by casting changing patterns of shade on the ground. A small rusted metal chandelier with a hanging shade pierced by cutouts of primitive figures hangs from the ceiling. When the chandelier is lighted it casts figurative shadows on the floor below. On the west side of this space, there are two benches and a large planter.

The upper garden is essentially level, with a slight slope draining water into the pond. Interwoven curved bands of smooth and conglomerate-studded concrete form the ground plane.

To the south is an open rectangular space with concrete paving. To the east, a rock retaining wall separates the garden from the museum path above. To the south, an in-ground planter backed by a retaining wall separates this section from the Mexican Garden below. In the center of this open space is a circular opening in the paving to offer space for a tree.

To the west a parallel set of red brick stairs and ramp accommodate the 16" drop in level between the upper and middle gardens. The ramp has approximately a 4% slope. A rusted metal railing separates the stairs from the ramp.

Middle Garden

The middle garden is a level, strongly linear geometric space. Different types of red brick provide paving, compose the western wall, and form the frame or seat walls surrounding in-ground planters. An in-ground planter to the south is balanced by a raised planter to the north. These planters direct circulation through the space by interrupting the flow of movement. Rusted metal wall lights focus light downward on walls and ground planes.

On the north side, a long planting bed backed by a stone retaining wall contains shrubs and smaller xeric vegetation. To the east is a striking view of the ramada above a stuccoed retaining wall.

Another paired ramp and stairway lead down to the Mexican Garden, which lies two feet below in level. The ramp and stairway are made from a textured concrete, and a rusted metal railing similar to that between the upper and middle gardens separates them from one another.

The Mexican Garden

The Mexican Garden lies immediately to the south of the other areas. The stairs from the middle garden provide an entrance into the center of the space, rather than to one end, as was the case with the other two gardens. The western and eastern ends of this lowest garden are unified by a pavement of flowing curvilinear patterns of river rock and stabilized decomposed granite, but the Mexican Garden has two stylistically different segments.

To the west a six-foot adobe wall (which has eroded considerably since the garden was installed) separates the Mexican Garden from the landscape outside. On a clear day there is a dramatic view of the valley and mountains to the west, set off by a dramatic group of palm trees just outside the garden. Low retaining walls made of concrete with a high conglomerate content set off planting areas to the west and north.

A six-sided fountain made of earth-toned concrete with burnt orange and teal ceramic tile inserts dominates this section of the garden. Vertical channels permit vines to grow up the sides of the central feature, and aquatic plants fill the top of the fountain. Water rises from the center of the upper basin and spills down the sides into a surrounding basin containing more aquatic plants. A narrow concrete sill separates the fountain from the paving.

A traditional Tohono O'odham ramada of unpeeled logs stands in the northwest corner. Under it are two poured concrete benches and a pot similar in style to the cast pot located at the entrance to the upper garden.

To the east, past the stairway/ramp entrance, the paving pattern of river rock and stabilized decomposed granite flows into a less formal area. Along the north side of this section runs a concrete battered wall textured with conglomerate. An informal planting of palms, yuccas and agaves form a centerpiece for a curving walkway set with benches. This is the most naturalistic area of the garden, surrounded with informal xeric plantings studded with Tucson Mountain boulders. The dense surrounding foliage provides a sense of enclosure, and tree branches form a ceiling overhead.

To the south of the entrance into the Mexican Garden from the middle garden is an informal pathway that leads southwest into the greater Desert Museum landscape.

Condition

The Sunset Garden is in excellent condition. It is well loved and well maintained. Shrubs and smaller vegetation have changed over time, as was intended by its designers, although original trees have been retained.

History:

The Arizona Sonora Desert Museum was founded in 1952 with the goal of providing a museum devoted to the interpretation and preservation of the Sonoran Desert. *Sunset Magazine* began to plan the Demonstration Garden in 1958, and on July 12, 1959, a memo from *Sunset Magazine* set out the mission: to help promote outdoor livability in desert gardens.⁴ The garden was to be a flexible space, permitting ongoing changes in hardscape and vegetation. When one experiment was completed, another would begin.⁵ The intent was to encourage the cultivation of native plants by demonstrating their use in an attractive contemporary context. With the news of the impending garden, Tucson area nurseries began growing and developing native plants in expectation of their coming popularity.

Guy Greene (1923-2003), a Tucson landscape architect, was commissioned to design the garden. A graduate of Amherst College and the University of Iowa, Greene was noted for a significant body of work, and his designs were nationally recognized.⁶ Among his other achievements, he founded the University of Arizona's landscape architecture program in 1966 and taught there until 1975. A colleague at the University, Warren Jones, had an extensive knowledge of native plants, and Jones advised Greene on the selection of vegetation for the Sunset

⁴ Richard C. Brusca, *Desert Gardens: A Photographic Tour of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum* (Brentwood, TN.: Cool Springs Press, 2010: 80-87).

⁵ "Demonstration Desert Garden." *Sunset Magazine*, January 1, 1960.

⁶ Blake Morlock, "Landscape Designer had Jobs Worldwide," *Tucson Citizen*, June 6, 2003.

Garden.⁷

The Sunset Garden was scheduled to open in October of 1960 with a budget of approximately \$3,000,⁸ but construction did not take place as planned. In 1961 it was rescheduled to open in the spring of the 1962, and the budget grew to \$25,000. Much delayed, it was finally opened on May 10, 1963, at a final cost of \$30,000.⁹ In 1969, Greene designed the second phase of the project – the Mexican Garden, which opened to the public on October 31, 1971. By 1972, the garden was a success, and nurseries were finally able to sell the plants they had been stockpiling since 1959.

In the early 1990s the garden underwent some minor modifications when the Desert Museum facilities were expanded.

Sources: Brooks, Gene. "Desert Rock Areas Blossom Like Rose at Museum." *Tucson Citizen*, November 1, 1962.

_____. "Desert Garden Ready." *Tucson Citizen*, January 1, 1963.

Brusca, Richard C. *Desert Gardens: A Photographic Tour of the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum*. Brentwood, TN.: Cool Springs Press, 2010. 80-87.

"Demonstration Desert Garden." *Sunset Magazine*, January 1, 1960.

"Demonstration Desert Garden." *Sunset Magazine*, May 1, 1964, 10-11.

"Final Section of Demonstration Desert Garden to Be Dedicated Sunday October 31 at 4 P. M." *Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Newsletter*, 1.

"Funeral Notices," *Tucson Citizen*, June 5, 2003.

<http://tucsoncitizen.com/morgue2/2003/06/05/170115-funeral-notice/>

Kay, Jane. "Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Goes Ahead with Garden Plans." *Tucson Citizen*, January 1, 1961.

"Landscaping with Desert Plants." *Arizona Sonora Desert Museum*, January 1, 1976.

Larson, Peggy Pickering. "The Desert Garden." In *Arizona-Sonora Desert*

⁷ A.E. Thompson, *Research in Landscape Architecture*, 1972, 1-16.

⁸ "Demonstration Desert Garden."

⁹ Gene Brooks, "Desert Garden Ready," *Tucson Citizen*, January 1, 1963.

Museum: A Scrapbook. Tucson, AZ.: Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum Press, 2002.

Larson, Peggy Pickering, and William Ascarza. *Arizona Sonora Desert Museum*. Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2010. 74-75.

"Last of Museum Garden Dedicated." *Tucson Citizen*, November 1, 1971.

McCoy, Esther. *Modern California Houses: Case Study Houses, 1945-1962*. New York, NY: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1962.

"A New Demonstration Desert Garden." *Sunset Magazine*, May 5, 1963, 116-18.

Thompson, A.E. *Research in Landscape Architecture*, 1972, 1-16.
http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/bitstream/10150/300376/1/pa-24-04-08-11_16.pdf

Historians: Helen Erickson, Editor

Alice Dowd, Student Researcher

Austin Kremer, Student Researcher

Jim Henry, Student Researcher

Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, Photographers

July 11, 2015

Entry 2015 HALS Challenge: Documenting Modernist Landscapes

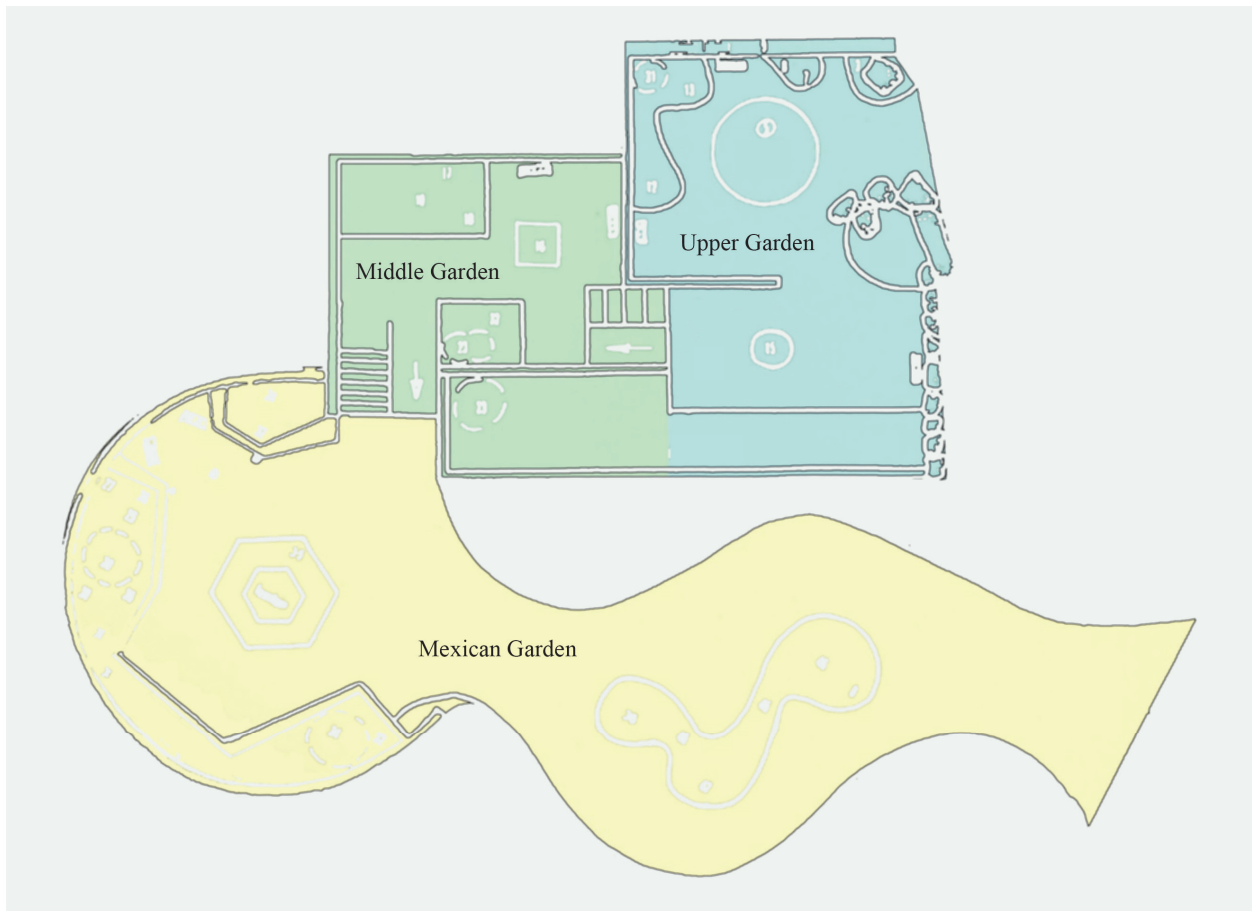


Figure 1. Map of the Sunset Garden drawn after "Demonstration Desert Garden." *Sunset Magazine*, May 1, 1964 (Alice Dowd, 2015).



Figure 2. Entrance to Sunset Garden, facing southwest (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015)



Figure 3. Upper garden, facing southeast (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015).



Figure 4. Middle garden, facing east (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015).



Figure 5. Middle garden, facing northwest (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015).



Figure 6. Mexican Garden, facing west (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015).



Figure 7. Mexican Garden ramada, facing northwest (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015).



Figure 8. Mexican Garden, facing east (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015).



Figure 9. Mexican Garden, facing west (Jude Ignacio and Gerardine Vargas, June 2015).



Figure 10. Aerial photograph of garden location ca. 1960s (Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives)



Figure 12. Aerial photograph of garden location 7/17/1996 (Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives).



Figure 13. Looking west into middle garden from upper garden (Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, 1972).



Figure 14. Middle garden looking west, before the Mexican Garden was installed (Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, 1962).



Figure 15. Looking east at the Sunset Garden entrance before renovation (Donald Vascimini, Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, 1978).



Figure 16. Looking northwest at the Sunset Garden entrance before renovation (Donald Vascimini, Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, 1978).



Figure 17. The Mexican Garden with adobe wall in new condition, looking west (Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, date unknown).



Figure 18. View from the Mexican Garden, looking northeast towards upper garden (Al Morgan, Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, 1978).



Figure 19. View of the Mexican Garden, looking east (Al Morgan, Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, 1978).



Figure 20. The Mexican Garden, before plants are installed, looking west (Arizona Sonora Desert Museum Archives, 1969).