

## RAP GARDENS IN FOCUS

Explore Sites That Participate in the AHS Reciprocal Admissions Program

# Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens

by Viveka Neveln



Top: Among the rhododendrons in Mendocino's collection is red-flowered *Rhododendron* 'Cornubia', which blooms in late winter or early spring. Above: A path in the Closed-Cone Pine Forest habitat.

**L**OCATED IN the small town of Fort Bragg in Northern California, Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens (MCBG) enjoys a mild climate that is ideal for many plants not able to survive the extreme temperatures elsewhere in the United States. As a result, it features a diverse selection of tender plants from around the world. From begonias and conifers to cacti and succulents, the 47-acre site has “something for everyone,” says Molly Barker, the garden’s executive director. “We’ve got Australian plants, South African plants, and plants from Scotland, but we’re also interested in conserving our native plants.”

### A RHAPSODY OF RHODODENDRONS

Among the first plants cultivated by the garden’s founders, Ernest and Betty Schoefer, when they acquired the property in 1961 were rhododendrons. The site proved to be an almost ideal setting for these plants, which are notoriously picknickety about growing conditions. Over the decades, the collection grew to include both native and exotic species, as well as numerous hybrids and cultivars. To date, MCBG has 315 taxa, many of which are endangered in their native ranges or no longer available in the nursery trade.

Visitors will likely encounter at least a few of these in bloom from December to June, but peak bloom is in April and May, when hundreds of individual rhododendrons produce a riot of color throughout the garden. For even more dazzling rhody displays, time your visit to coincide with the annual **John Druecker Memorial Rhododendron Show**, scheduled this year on May 4 and 5.

### COLORFUL COLLECTIONS

All sorts of tender plants have adapted so well to MCBG’s climate that the garden has developed several notable collections

of them over time. For example, its extensive collection of heaths (*Erica* spp. and *Daboecia* spp.) and heathers (*Culluna* spp.) became nationally accredited in 2010 by the American Public Gardens Association's National Plant Collection program. The heaths are in bloom year-round, while the heathers start up where the rhodies leave off in June and go through fall.

A dazzling array of dahlias provides more summer color in sunny spots throughout the grounds, peaking in August and September, while scores of fuchsia varieties light up the shadier nooks. Even more fuchsias fill the **Mae E. Lauer Display House**, along with a profusion of tuberous begonia hybrids and cultivars. Also blooming throughout summer is a unique collection of



Visitors can catch views of the Pacific Ocean, such as this one during a winter storm.

heritage roses gathered from roadsides and abandoned homesteads around Mendocino County that showcase older varieties well suited to the region.



Mendocino's heath and heather collection is one of the country's most comprehensive.

## Additional Information

### Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens

18220 North Highway One  
Fort Bragg, CA 95437.  
(707) 964-4352 ext. 16  
[www.gardenbythesea.org](http://www.gardenbythesea.org)

- Hours: March–October: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
November–February: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- Fees: Adults (15 and older): \$15; Seniors (65+): \$12; Juniors (6 to 14): \$8; Children under 6 and members: free.
- RAP benefits: AHS members receive free admission and library privileges.

While there is nearly always something in bloom at MCBG, its conifer collection of 200 taxa offers interest any time of year. It includes endemic species as well as those from around the world, several of which are endangered in their native habitats.

### CONSERVATION IS KEY

Beyond its efforts to conserve the biodiversity of cultivated plants, MCBG focuses on preserving the region's natural landscapes and ecosystems like the native coastal grassland it is in the process of restoring. The garden also provides essential habitat for a variety of wildlife, including more than 180 species of birds. And visitors may even be fortunate enough to spot whales and other marine life while admiring MCBG's stunning views of the rugged California coastline it has preserved.

*Viveka Neveln is Associate Editor of The American Gardener.*

## HOW THE RECIPROCAL ADMISSIONS PROGRAM (RAP) WORKS

This American Horticultural Society program is designed to encourage people to visit gardens, arboreta, and conservatories while traveling. As a current member, you receive free admission and/or other special discounts at more than 320 sites throughout North America! (Check "Regional Happenings," starting on page 52, to see upcoming events at some of these participating gardens.) Here's how to make the most of this member benefit:

- View the current list of participating locations and the RAP benefits they offer at [www.ahsgardening.org/rapgardens](http://www.ahsgardening.org/rapgardens). At the beginning of each year, this list is also published in a full-color booklet. To order, visit [www.ahsgardening.org/RAPGuideHelp](http://www.ahsgardening.org/RAPGuideHelp).
- Be sure to contact the garden before your visit to confirm the RAP benefits you can expect to receive. (Some sites may choose to enforce a 90-mile exclusion policy; if your zip code falls within that distance from the location, you would not receive the offered RAP benefits

there.) Admission to special events or exhibits may also be excluded.

- Present your current membership card at the admissions counter or gift shop to receive the RAP benefit(s) offered by that garden. Each card will only admit the individual(s) listed on the card. In the case of a family, couple, or household membership card that does not list individual names, the garden must extend the benefit(s) to at least two members; it is at the garden's discretion to extend benefits to more than two individuals. Some gardens may require a photo ID.