



NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

# The New Orleans Botanical Garden

*Mute Victims of Katrina: Four Louisiana Landscapes at Risk*

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The New Orleans Botanical Garden was originally planned and planted during the 1930s as a Works Progress Administration [WPA] project. Originally called simply the Rose Garden, it was created for the enjoyment and education of the general public who, unable to afford the luxury of private gardens, would otherwise have been deprived of enjoying such horticultural pleasures. The garden represents the collaboration of three designers: architect Richard Koch, landscape architect William Wiedorn, and sculptor Enrique Alferez. Each played a prominent design role in the New Orleans community during the twentieth century.

## HISTORY

The New Orleans Botanical Garden was part of a larger Master Plan for City Park. The City Park Board of Directors solicited Master Plan proposals in 1930, ultimately selecting the Chicago firm Bennett, Parsons, and Frost of Chicago over the Olmsted Brothers firm of Brookline, MA. Unfortunately, the City Park Board had no money at that time to implement the plan. Nevertheless, the plan had been prepared: when Federal money became available, the Park Board was able to solicit funds from the Federal government to begin construction. One of the major reasons why City Park received such massive funding — \$13million in the 1930s — was that Federal administrators and their State coordinators considered landscape projects to be ideal for relief work. Such projects could profitably employ a large amount of hand labor: during the 1930s, there were times when over 14,000 men were employed building City Park.

The New Orleans Botanical Garden thus was built during the WPA era as part of this larger City Park project. The Garden itself represents the collaboration of three designers: architect Richard Koch, landscape architect William Wiedorn, and sculptor Enrique Alferez. Each played a prominent design role in the New Orleans community during the twentieth century.



Koch served on a City Park Board committee that was charged with recommending aesthetic improvements to the Park. While Koch designed most of the park buildings, Weidorn was in charge of landscape improvements. Alferez was brought in later for artistic embellishments.

One of the major features of the New Orleans Botanical Garden is its Rose Garden. In the landscape plan for the original Rose Garden, Koch's architectural framework gave the spatial skeletal structure to the plan, Wiedorn's planting design defined the landscape character, and sculptural focal points designed by Alferez gave the garden its iconography (references to classical mythology as well as to the native flora and fauna). This garden is a rare and significant example of a landscaped space whose detail and ornament are representative of the Art Deco movement in architecture and sculpture. The predominant materials of the garden's features are concrete, brick, wood, and steel, placing the design squarely within the idiom of the WPA that utilized common, inexpensive materials to produce buildings and spaces for the common workers in America.

Today, the New Orleans Botanical Garden is one of the very few surviving examples of garden design from the WPA and Art Deco periods. Despite ongoing economic hardship and neglect, the garden has retained its integrity for more than a half-century. The garden also continues to fill a critical need for people living in the New Orleans area, especially those who are avid gardeners. Prior to Katrina, the New Orleans Botanical Garden was the center of horticultural activity for the region; it will continue to be important as New Orleans recovers. The WPA era buildings and Enrique Alferez's sculpture all survived the hurricane. Approximately 90% of the plant material in the garden was killed by the floodwaters. Fortunately, the large Live Oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) survived the wind and water. Our greatest loss was the large Magnolias. Sadly, all the Southern Magnolias (*Magnolia grandiflora*) and Sweetbay Magnolias (*Magnolia virginiana*), died as a result of the high water. These Magnolias were part of the original WPA landscape plan.

## THE THREAT

Hurricane Katrina exacerbated a long-standing threat to the gardens: lack of funds. The New Orleans Botanical Garden is just one part of the 1300-acre New Orleans City Park. Prior to Katrina, the Park's budget was \$10.8 million per year: it receives no operating revenue from the City of New Orleans and just \$200,000 per year from the State of Louisiana. The Park must generate all additional revenue via fees for services (golf, catering, entry to the Botanical Garden and traditional fundraising methods). Thus the garden relies primarily on self-generated funds. However, due to Katrina damage, it has not yet reopened. Furthermore, the population of New Orleans has declined substantially since the hurricane, and no one can estimate many visitors the botanical garden will receive after it opens. Since Katrina the garden has received donations, but essential self-generated funds are virtually non-existent.

## HOW TO HELP

- Donate money to replace plant material that was destroyed.
- Donate money so that we can re-instate educational programs, repair facilities and continue to offer the special events and programs that the public enjoyed prior to Katrina.

The citizens of the New Orleans area, the Botanical Foundation Board, volunteers, the 35 member clubs of the Federated Council of Garden Clubs, and others who love the New Orleans Botanical Garden are doing what they can to support the Garden and foster its recovery. Fortunately, unlike some cultural landscapes, the Garden has no opponents. Landslide 2006 intends to focus awareness and attention on the New Orleans Botanical Garden, and alert the country to the challenges facing this valuable and irreplaceable asset.



People wishing to donate to the New Orleans Botanical Garden should make checks payable to:

New Orleans Botanical Garden Foundation  
c/o Genevieve Trimble, President  
P.O.Box 993  
St. Francisville, LA 70775

Site Address

New Orleans Botanical Garden  
1 Palm Drive  
New Orleans, LA 70124

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