

# Palomar College campus grows into a unique oasis

Detail view of succulents growing at the Cactus and Succulent Garden at Palomar College. (Charlie Neuman)

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## SAN MARCOS

Its entrance is an acre-size cactus garden. A Polynesian paradise is lush with tropical trees. Trails lead through 10 acres of exotic and native plants and trees.

It's no secret that Palomar College resembles an arboretum, and a recent recognition makes it official. ArbNet, an online community of professionals in the field, has designated the entire campus a Level II (out of four) arboretum.

Palomar is the only community college in California with the distinction from AbNet, an organization that shares knowledge, experience and other resources regarding trees and plants worldwide. The only other college campus in California recognized by AbNet is UC Davis, which has the highest ranking at Level IV.

The Level II accreditation recognizes arboreta (the plural of arboretum) with at least 100 species of woody plants, paid staff members, an enhanced public education program and a documented collections policy.

Palomar has more than 300 plants labeled, but grounds services supervisor Tony Rangel isn't sure how many unlabeled ones are throughout the campus. It's easily in the thousands, he said, and interns are working with GPS devices to track and document all the plants at the school.

"We're looking at crunching numbers early next year," Rangel said. "We think the cactus garden alone at one time had close to 4,000 plants."

The cactus and succulent garden at the college's eastern entrance on Comet Circle goes back to the 1950s and was the first of the 31 themed gardens on campus. More than 100 of its plants were butchered by a vandal in 2004, and the garden is now gated and accessible only by appointment.

The roughly 200-acre campus includes endangered coastal sagebrush and the Edwin and Francis Hunter Arboretum. At least one tree on campus, a seven-trunk Mediterranean palm in front of the Brubeck Theater, is estimated to be about 100 years old, Rangel said.

Among the most stunning areas on campus is the recently completed Polynesian garden, found at the west end of the Natural Sciences building.

The garden and other recent landscape projects were created as Rangel and the grounds crew began looking for ways to address the ongoing drought.

"It seems counterintuitive," Rangel admitted as he watched a stream of running water flow between small hills of what appear to be lava rock, but are actually colored mortar.

The streams and pond, he explained, demonstrate that gardens can use water in a responsible way. In this case, water is pumped from an underground 1,500-gallon tank that is filled with runoff from a roof. Everything is designed to minimize splashing and leakage so no water is wasted, and at night the pumps are turned off and the pond runs dry to keep mosquitoes away.

“What’s really important for Palomar College and the grounds department is to use the landscape as an educational tool to teach people about the importance of conservation,” Rangel said.

Most of that education comes from signage that gives the scientific and common names of plants. A red border around a sign means it is endangered, a yellow border means it’s vulnerable and white means it’s secure or there is not enough data about its status in the wild.

“What many people don’t realize is that in the United States, we have a significant number of endangered species, and there are two states in particular that have the highest number of endangered species,” he said. “One of them is Hawaii, and the other is California.”

There still are lawns on campus, but many have been torn out and replaced with drought-resistant plants that have reduced the college’s water bill.

Many of the plants and trees are grown on campus or donated, but some were harder to acquire. The Polynesian garden’s manu lele sugar cane took six months of paperwork with four agencies to bring over from Hawaii, Rangel said.

“Arguably Palomar College has one of the greatest concentrations of plant diversity on public display within a relatively small area in San Diego County, rivaled only by Balboa Park, the San Diego Zoo and Safari Park and San Diego Botanical Garden,” said Rangel, a certified arborist with the International Society of Arboriculture.

It’s hard to walk through the campus without coming upon one of the dozens of themed gardens. Chinese Maidenhair trees with bright yellow leaves are between Multi-Disciplinary buildings while Australian plants are on the south end of the complex. The Brubeck Theater is surrounded by agave from Mexico, trees from North Africa and plants from the Arabian Peninsula.

Rangel said the new arboretum certification will allow the college to work more closely and efficiently on conservation and education projects with other like-minded institutions across the country.

A new nursery at the Edwin and Francis Hunter Arboretum should be complete in about 18 to 20 months, and there have been talks about building a visitors center once it is finished.

People can take a self-guided tour of the campus, but Rangel leads guided tours twice a year. Check the events section of the Palomar College website some time in the new year for the spring tour date.

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