

# Self-Guided Contemplative Tour

University of California Botanical Garden *at* Berkeley



## A Self-guided Contemplative Tour

*“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in,  
where nature may heal and give” —John Muir*

Gardens are places of peace and beauty. Here, one can set everyday stress and worries aside for a time, slow down to the quiet pace of the garden, and find refreshment, renewal and healing. There are treasures to find no matter the season: in the exuberant colors of spring, in the maturity of summer growth, in the beauty of autumn colors and harvest, or in the winter silence of rest. There is peace here on cool foggy days and on hot sunny days.

We invite you to take your time to refocus your

attention and expand your senses as you attend deeply to the living environment around you. Choose quiet places from those listed below. You might read one of the poems provided or simply sit and meditate for a few moments.

Walking slowly is as important as reaching a particular destination. Contemplation is simply the act of looking thoughtfully at something for a long time. Enjoy your time in this beautiful Garden to be here now.

## Southern Africa Hill

From the main **Garden Entrance**, cross the plaza, and keep left to take the upper paved road. Pass the length of the **Arid House** (glasshouse) to the **Southern African Collection** on the left. Take the first set of stairs up the hill and continue on the path, parallel to the main road. Notice a line of pale green cycads (*Encephalartos horridus*), whose plant ancestors co-existed with dinosaurs. Linger on your way to notice the different colors, textures, and shapes of plants stretching around you. In spring, the hill is carpeted with blue, orange, and yellow blooming bulbs and annuals. In any season, aloes in shades of green, blue, and lavender, edged with orange or red teeth, surround you. Continue up into the hillside and choose any bench to look out over the expanse of the **Deserts of the Americas** below, with the tall columnar cactus, grown from seeds planted in 1956, and the towering California fan palm. On the left can be seen the tops of lofty redwoods growing along Strawberry Creek.

Consider your experience of the view as a portal, as **John Muir** suggests *“Between every two pine trees is a door to a new way of life.”*

If you'd like to meditate, which is simply one tool to focus your mind, here are some suggestions. Find a quiet bench, sit down and get comfortable. Then sit with as straight a back as you comfortably can and place your feet on the ground. Close your eyes. Begin to pay attention to your breathing. Notice as you breathe in how it feels, how deeply you breathe, and then notice your breath going out. Because we can only think of one thing at a time, as we think about our breathing, all else falls away for that moment. For most of us, after a time we find ourselves thinking of something else. Gently let those thoughts go, and return to following your breath. Each return is a moment of pure awareness. Continue this for as long as is comfortable, two minutes, five minutes or longer.

# “Invitation”

Mary Oliver

Oh do you have time  
to linger  
for just a little while  
out of your busy

and very important day  
for the goldfinches  
that have gathered  
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,  
to see who can sing  
the highest note,  
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,  
or the most tender?  
Their strong, blunt beaks  
drink the air

as they strive  
melodiously  
not for your sake  
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning  
but for sheer delight and gratitude—  
believe us, they say,  
it is a serious thing

just to be alive  
on this fresh morning  
in the broken world.  
I beg of you,

do not walk by  
without pausing  
to attend to this  
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.  
It could mean everything.  
It could be what Rilke meant,  
when he wrote:  
You must change your life.



## Bamboo Grove

Continue walking through the **Southern African** area to return to the **main road**. Continue along this road with the **Japanese Pool** below you on your right. At the top of the pool with the sound of the creek flowing down, take the **wooden steps** on the left toward a dawn redwood. In early spring, you'll pass flowering dark red quince and pink camellias. At the end of the path, pause in the cool retreat at the **picnic table** and listen to the rustling bamboo. Explore the surrounding paths to discover a giant old California buckeye with knobby trunk and more.



To read a poem contemplatively, simply open yourself to reading it through slowly, not struggling for meanings. Pay attention to your responses, noticing what words or phrases resonate within you. Then focus on those for a few moments.

*“Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are dirt.” —John Muir*

Excerpt from **“The Brain  
is Wider than the Sky”**

Emily Dickinson

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—

For—put them side by side—

The one the other will contain

With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—

For—hold them—Blue to Blue—

The one the other will absorb—

As Sponges—Buckets—do—

**“To make a prairie”**

Emily Dickinson

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee

One clover and a bee

And revery.

The revery alone will do

If bees are few.

## Japanese Pool

Return to the **main road** with the **Japanese Pool** below. Walk a few paces up to take the first path downhill toward the Japanese Pool. Pause on the rock stepping stones to observe the life of the pond close-up. Consider the placement and shape of the rocks as a frame for this serene waterscape. There is a wooden decorative gateway near this tranquil space which honors Chiura Obata, professor of art at UC Berkeley from 1939-53, and his wife Haruko,

an Ikebana artist. Both were interned during WWII. Obata taught art to more than 600 internees in the Japanese camps, advising *“don’t just look at the dust on the ground, look beyond.”* To his students at Cal, he remarked, *“No one should pass through four years of college without being given the knowledge of beauty and the eyes with which to see it.”*

What sources of beauty please you in this spot? How is the pool both still and moving? You may want to close your eyes to attend to the smells and sounds.



## **“The Peace of Wild Things”**

Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
In fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
Rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
Who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting for their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

## **Excerpt from “In a Far Field”**

Theodore Roethke

All finite things reveal infinitude:  
Odor of basswood on a mountain slope  
A scent beloved of bees;  
Silence of water above a sunken tree:  
The pure serene of memory in one being  
A ripple widening from a single stone  
Winding around the waters of the world.



## Circle of Redwoods

From the pool, walk back up to the path, notice the **stone lantern** honoring Haruko Obata, and continue along this path through tree-sized rhododendrons. Turn right to go straight down many flights of **wooden steps**. Watch for a **pair of benches** in a clearing along **Strawberry Creek**. Towering above us, redwoods can grow to several hundred feet and live for centuries. Choose a bench to contemplate the intimacy and immensity of geologic time.

Preserved in fossils over the Northern Hemisphere, the **dawn redwood** (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) was thought extinct when it was rediscovered in Hubei China in the 1940s and brought to UC Berkeley by paleontology professor Ralph Chaney, who describes his encounter: “*We stood beneath the great*



*tree our hands upon its gray, red-flecked bark, our eyes uplifted to branches which rose nearly a hundred feet above. Here was a fossil come to life, a giant whose kind had persisted out of the past to tell us the story of the earth millions of years before man came to live on it.”*

Touch the spongy bark and look up as far as you can. A visitor here once said, “*I’ve never touched a living thing so much bigger and so much older than me.*” Compare the difference in scale between the giant redwoods and the miniature plant life on the stones and banks of the creek—tiny moss, flat, round liverworts, the lichen on the rocks.

Stand still for a while in the clearing, with your eyes closed. Do you notice a slight swaying of your body even as you stand still? Dancers have called this “the small dance of the body.”

## “Go Among the Trees and Sit Still”

Wendell Berry

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
Around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
Where I left them, asleep like cattle...

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
And the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

Walk back up the last two sets of stairs, then up the path toward other large redwoods. These are **coast redwoods** (*Sequoia sempervirens*), trees native to California and Oregon. The tallest of all redwoods, they depend on fog for 30% of their water. Imagine the life we cannot see hundreds of feet above in the canopy that may never touch ground—mosses, lichen, snails, worms, salamanders, even huckleberry and rhododendrons grow on branches overhead in its native habitat.

Linger among these trees to consider the interdependence of nature. *“When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world” —John Muir.*

## Lawn & Herb Garden

Slowly move through the cool depths of the **redwoods**. As you pass the last coast redwood on your left, turn right down a path to emerge onto the expanse of **green lawn**. Enjoy the sunny warmth of a bench facing west. In spring you will enjoy dogwoods and magnolias in bloom.

Wait, close your eyes, listen to the garden around you. *"Allow nature's peace to flow into you, as sunshine flows into trees."* —John Muir

After you've rested, continue along to explore the **Herb Garden**, to the left from the benches at the top of the lawn. Herbs have been used for centuries in many cultures for flavoring, food, medicine, and fragrances. On the uphill side of the lawn is a **Chinese Medicinal Herb Garden** with detailed signs about the healing properties of particular plants. Inhale the aromas of the kitchen spices in the Western **Herb Garden** below. Rosemary, lavender, oregano, bay, thyme, and scented geraniums thrive on this sunny hillside.

## “Reverie in Open Air”

Rita Dove

I acknowledge my status as a stranger:  
Inappropriate clothes, odd habits  
Out of sync with wasp and wren.  
I admit I don't know how  
To sit still or move without purpose.  
I prefer books to moonlight, statuary to trees.

But this lawn has been leveled for looking,  
So I kick off my sandals and walk its cool green.  
Who claims we're mere muscle and fluids?  
My feet are the primitives here.  
As for the rest—ah, the air now  
Is a tonic of absence, bearing nothing  
But news of a breeze.

## Mexican/Central American Cloud Forest

At the far end of the **Herb Garden**, cross the main road and look for the wooden sign directing you to enter the **Eastern North America** section and path that continues toward the **Mexican and Central American Area**. Walk through the Cloud Forest to the Pine-Oak Woodland. This wide, flat path is often missed and promises deep quiet and seclusion. It's a wonderful place to practice Walking Meditation, another way to pay attention. In this practice, instead of following your breathing, focus on each step as you slowly and intentionally walk a path. Notice what part of your foot touches the ground first, what is next, when you shift your weight and move the other foot forward. Repeat as you walk a path, returning your focus when you notice you are thinking of something else. Again, there is refreshment as you think only of each step.



Listen for birds, especially hummingbirds, and notice the brightly blooming salvias. Consider the massive shapes of the dark green agaves on either side of the path, and their capacity to endure droughts by storing water in their fleshy, toothed leaves. Some may be in bloom with flower stalks like giant asparagus three times the size of the plant below. Near the end of the path, you may catch a scent of curry or maple syrup from the South American *Escallonia* nearby.

You'll emerge from this long walk near the **Crops of the World Garden**. If you feel done, you can make your way back to the entrance on any of the main paths on the map. Or continue on to the glorious views that await those that climb...





Mexican flowering dogwood, *Cornus florida* var. *urbiniana*

## Garden of Old Roses

Before entering the Crops of the World Garden, make a sharp right to turn up a path with long waves of grass filling the bed on your right. Follow this path until it emerges at the **Garden of Old Roses**.

Inhale the scents of these roses from China, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, cultivated for thousands of years by humans.

Weddings are often celebrated here; it's also a deep pleasure to have it to yourself.

Center yourself on a bench and contemplate another portal, the framed view of the Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge.



Excerpt from **“Little Gidding V”**

T.S. Elliot

We shall not cease from exploration  
and the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time. . .  
At the source of the longest river  
the voice of the hidden waterfall  
and the children in the apple tree  
not known, because not looked for  
but heard, half heard in the stillness  
between the two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always—  
A condition of complete simplicity.

Excerpt from **“Kindness”**

Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know kindness  
As the deepest thing inside,  
You must know sorrow  
As the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow  
You must speak to it till your voice  
Catches the thread of all sorrow  
And you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness  
That makes sense anymore  
Only kindness that ties your shoes  
And sends you out into the day  
To mail letters and purchase bread  
Only kindness that raises its head  
From the crowd of the world to say  
It is you I have been looking for,  
And then goes with you everywhere  
Like a shadow or a friend.



## Water Pavilion

Make your way to the main path at the top of the Garden of Old Roses. You will see a wooden sign demarking the **Mediterranean** section which is planted on the upward slope. With the rose garden on your right, walk to the end of the road where you will see a fence and the edge of the Garden. Turn left up the path to find two large old **redwood water tanks** with a special contemplative space created between them.

Artist Mary Anne Friel created **Water Pavilion** in 2012 as part of the Garden's "Natural Discourse" site-specific exhibition. The circular wall was built with reclaimed old growth redwood, similar to the two existing water tanks. Enter through the vertical opening.


The theme of water is echoed in various forms, as you look towards a free-falling trail of water, and as you turn around to gaze out at the vista of the Bay, a quintessential Bay Area view perfectly framed by the slot through which you entered.

## Excerpt from “Celtic Twilight”

W.B. Yeats

We can make our minds so like still water that beings  
gather around us that they may see, it may be,  
their own images and so live for a moment with a clear,  
perhaps even a fiercer life because of our stillness.





To get back to the Entrance from the Garden of  
Old Roses, follow the main road downhill.

We hope you will continue to feel the effects of  
this mindful walk through the Garden.

**Please return this Guide  
to its original location.**

Thank you to docents Susan Van Dyne  
and Julie Stokstad for writing this  
enriching tour as part of our Wellness  
in the Garden series.

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