

Ethel M Chocolates - Botanical Cactus Garden near Las Vegas

By Pam Story

On your next trip westward toward Las Vegas...how about combining marvelous tasting chocolates and great cactus and succulent viewing?

The naturalistic setting of the Botanical Cactus Garden at Ethel M's Chocolate Factory in Henderson contains one of the world's largest collections of drought-tolerant ornamentals, cacti and other succulents. Of the over 300 species on the grounds, over half are cacti and succulents largely native to the American Southwest, and the rest are desert trees and shrubs from the Southwest United States, Australia and South America. All the plants were chosen for their beautiful floral displays and their ability to adapt to the Southern Nevada climate.

One of the highlights of the Cactus Garden is the giant saguaro (*Carnegiea gigantea*), which comes from the Sonoran deserts of Arizona and Mexico. During May, the saguaro produces beautiful white flowers that bats pollinate at night while later the Papago and Apache tribes create a wine using the saguaro's juicy red fruit.

The ocotillo tree (*Fouquieria splendens*) is another important species that appears throughout the garden. The ocotillo is from the Sonoran and Chihuahua deserts but, unlike deciduous trees, produces leaves whenever there is water. During the spring the ocotillo produces clusters of fiery red flowers.

The thorn less mesquite trees (*Prosopis chilensis*) and the Mexican palo verde trees (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) shade plants and visitors to the garden.

Many smaller cacti can be found between the larger ones. The clumping hedgehogs (*Echinocereus*) produce pink and violet blossoms in spring, while the delicate orange flowers of the fish hook barrels (*Echinocactus wiisslizenii*) bloom in August and September. They and a variety of prickly pears (*Opuntia*) are native to the Sonoran desert of Arizona.

The yellow-spine teddy bear cholla (*Opuntia bigelovii*) is one of the most attractive, yet spiny cacti of the Southwest. These plants are displayed in a natural setting but have been placed out of the reach of visitors' intentional or unintentional contact.

Some of the largest displays are the Nevada cacti from the Mojave Desert and the Sonora province. Among these are the ocotillo, compass barrel and pygmy barrel that grow in the Las Vegas Valley foothills.

A few of the most interesting shrubs in the garden include the silver-leaved brittlebush (*Encelia arinose*), the desert bird of paradise (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), the desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*) and the yellow trumpet flower (*Tecoma stans*). The garden is also seeded with numerous species of spring desert wildflowers, including the spectacular

Australian Sturt's desert pear (*cliathus formosus*), which keeps its low feathery foliage and large deep red flowers until August or September.

Additionally...snails, microbes, plants and fish are feasting at the Ethel M chocolates factory, but not on the chocolates. They are part of an industrial wastewater recycling plant called the Living Machine. This recycling plant was designed and built by Living Technologies of Burlington, VT to specifically purify the chocolate factory's wastewater. It uses no chemicals and is designed to mimic nature's natural water purification process.

Visitors can view the Living Machine over an acre of wastewater-consuming ecologies in tanks, marshes and reed beds. This system transforms wastewater into water clean enough to be used in landscape irrigation, air-conditioning systems and vehicle washing. By treating the wastewater, the system contributes to saving over 20,000 gallons of water a day. This incredible garden and Living Machine are one of the best collaborations between man and nature.