

Arboretum News

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50 Years of Plants and People - California Arboretum Foundation 1948-1998

A corrupt pre-war Los Angeles was the backdrop for many of Raymond Chandler's "noir" genre novels. World-weary private detective Philip Marlowe shuttled between various Southland locales as murder and mayhem played out in Chandler's inventive prose. The backdrops for these stories ran the gamut from palatial estates to run-down bungalows. What was the landscaping like back then?

Reviews of some of Chandler's works show that in *Farewell My Lovely*, Marlowe is trying to help Moose Malloy, a bank robber just released from prison, find his missing girlfriend. Marlowe pulls up to a "dried-out brown house with a dried-out brown lawn in front of it." The narration continues: "There was a large bare patch around a tough looking palm tree." What kind of lawn was Marlowe looking at? According to *The Garden Beautiful in California*, a garden manual published by the Los Angeles Times in 1940, Kentucky Bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*) was the most widely used grass in Los Angeles. Later on hybrid bermudas, dichondra, and finally dwarf tall fescues, would predominate in L.A. lawns. Bluegrass would be an especially good candidate for a dry summer lawn because unless it is regularly watered its shallow root system causes it to dry out rapidly. Wild bermuda, considered a weed then and now, is another possibility, although it turns more yellow than brown when it goes dormant from lack of water. The "tough looking palm tree" is probably *Phoenix canariensis*, a stout, well-armed palm popular in Los Angeles since the turn of the century.

The Big Sleep, which was made into a popular movie of the same name starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, may



"GARDENS OF THE SILVER SCREEN" THE LOS ANGELES GARDEN SHOW -PLANT NOIR-

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be considered one of Chandler's best novels. In the beginning of the book Marlowe (played in the movie by Bogart) is summoned to the residence of millionaire General Sternwood. After a flirtatious encounter with Sternwood's hopped-

up daughter, the detective is led through a huge greenhouse for a meeting with the wheelchair-bound Sternwood.

Chandler describes the greenhouse: "The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men...after a while he (Marlowe) came to a clearing in the middle of the jungle under a domed roof". In the course of the meeting General Sternwood asks Marlowe if he likes orchids, to which Marlowe responds, "not particularly." Sternwood then comments "they are nasty things. Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. And their perfume has the rotten sweetness of a prostitute."

The inspiration for Sternwood was probably Edward Laurence Doheny (1856-1935), a Los Angeles oil magnate who made his fortune when he discovered oil in what is now downtown L.A.. Doheny's mansion near Adams and Figueroa once boasted one of the largest greenhouses on the West Coast. This conservatory, measuring 75 by 200 feet and almost three stories high, was also the first greenhouse on the West Coast to be built of steel on a concrete foundation. Doheny kept a collection of cycads and palms there, many collected in Mexico, Cuba and Guatemala by Edward Howard. Railroad carloads of plants arrived regularly from 1907 to 1914.

Although there is apparently no listing of plants available, Doheny surely would have had palms like *Calyptrocalyx*, *Astrocaryum*, Aerial-rooted *Socratea durissima*, various species of *Caryota*, *Psuedophoenix*, *Trithrinax*, *Coccothrinax spisa* and many more.

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Gardens of the Silver Screen

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Doheny loved his indoor jungle. In fact when he was too ill to walk he insisted on being taken into the structure in his wheelchair. After his death the Chester Place property was donated to the Catholic Church and today it is the campus of Mount St. Mary's College. The conservatory no longer exists. The only thing that remains is a large pool that was located in the middle of the structure. 🌿

For your enjoyment, the following plants and trees in the above article can be found on the grounds at The Arboretum: Phoenix canareiensis and Cycads - The Tropical Forest • Orchids - The Tropical Greenhouse • Caryota and Trithrinax - Palm and Bamboo Section.

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