

# Moss Places

## San Antonio Botanical Garden

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This young botanical garden is located near downtown. The city is beautiful and the San Antonio Botanical Garden (SABOT) is a good compliment. The 33 acres are comprised of formal gardens, native habitats, a conservatory, and demonstration gardens. It is large enough for a healthy hike, but dress appropriately. I expected 50s, but the temp hovered in the high 70s. You are not supposed to sweat after Thanksgiving! What's really going on! Anyway...

SABOT opened in 1980, so there are no towering trees or bamboo (see [Quail Botanical Gardens](#)) to humble you. (For that experience take the Riverwalk and marvel at massive bald cypresses that are centuries old.) This garden seems created to educate the public, which makes it one of my favorites. They have classrooms, a tomato-filled children's garden, xeriscaping designs, an orange grove, and good signage. A colorful kiosk near the Texas Native Trail explains the climate, geography, and plant composition of the natural habitats. The website, [www.sabot.org](http://www.sabot.org), gives more info about classes and programs.

### *Eucharis grandiflora* Amazon lily:

Not many plants were flowering at SABOT, so the *Eucharis* was a real treat. This graceful bulb comes from South America and is too tender for all but the mildest climates. A couple of clumps were blooming in the Exhibit Room greenhouse. There were also many orchids and some unfamiliar epiphytes flowering. The ferns supplied a soft green backdrop, while the poinsettias added contrast and color.





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### 33 ACRES OF ROOMS

SABOT is divided into distinct rooms. There are a few areas with sweeping views and structures that connect some spaces; but on a whole the gardens are separate. The use of plantings, hills, and structures to cordon off the rooms makes the garden seem larger than 33 acres. There is a lot of ground to cover.

After you pay your six bucks (bring your student id for a discount), you walk out into a garden space and are greeted by beautiful oaks. I followed the trees to the Garden for the Blind. The room has plants of different textures and fragrances along with lots of little statuary.



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### FEW FLOWERS IN LATE NOVEMBER BUT GOOD STRUCTURE AND DESIGN

I visited in late November so the garden was muted. For instance, the wildflower meadow was a lush lawn. I am sure in spring it explodes in color and interest. Chomonque, an evergreen shrub in the aster family, was one of the few blooming plants. The south Texas native was crowded with fragrant white blossoms that resembled the individual flowers of Joe-pye weed. The sweet scent attracted bees, butterflies, beetles, and me. Other bloomers included aloe, hesperaloe, roses, and the beautiful chorisia along with some annuals, like: pentas, marigold, and petunia.



With few flowering plants, the focus became the hardscapes and design. The wisteria arbor and fountain plaza make great use of the natural axes at SABOT. The live oaks and agaves at the end of the fountain grotto are perfectly placed. Statues and

benches are sprinkled throughout the formal gardens. My personal favorite is the Viking boat to the left of the fountain grotto.

The Japanese garden, a gift from their sister city in Kumamoto, Japan, also has nice hardscapes. The bamboo fence is one of the best. Bamboo stems are intricately woven into a wooden frame. The individual stalks are oriented as they were growing with smaller branches going up. The top of the fence was an impenetrably dense mat of bamboo twigs. I imagine fields of bamboo uniformly grown just for building material, maybe not. Regardless, the woven fence is an idea worth borrowing.



## FUTURISTIC CONSERVATORY AND COURTYARD OASIS



**Top:** Conservatory peaks  
**Bottom:** Tropical courtyard

Other SABOT features include an outdoor amphitheatre, a stone overlook, fountains, and winding paths. However, the most impressive structure is the Halsell Conservatory. It seems weird to have a greenhouse for such a

warm climate, but occasionally San Antonio can get chilly. The conservatory is built into the surrounding landscape. Jutting glass towers resemble stark mountain peaks on the hillsides. It is supposed to be futuristic; but when I entered, it felt ancient to me. I imagined that it was the ruins of an old Persian garden. (Let me clarify. This is a compliment.)

When you first enter the conservatory, you walk through a short tunnel and arrive in a round, open air space with a large stone (like a washer) surrounded by low plants. Groundcovers creep down the concrete walls to add character and age.

A doorway on the opposite side leads to a medium sized greenhouse with waterfalls, ferns, orchids, and eucharis. Exiting the greenhouse you arrive at an outdoor

courtyard with a fabulous pool and interesting tropicals. This lush oasis put me in the mind of a Biblical garden. The courtyard is surrounded by a horseshoe shaped building, which holds more interesting greenhouses. In the Palm and Cycad Pavilion you spiral up along the outer edge, like hiking a tropical mountain (except your path is wide and paved). The Fern Grotto holds the garden's best water feature, an overhanging waterfall. And don't miss the iron horned toad, which stands guard in the Desert Pavilion.



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## TEXAS NATIVE TRAILS

Outside, the South Texas natural area reminded me of California chaparral, only taller. However, the hard, waxy leaved shrubs had unfamiliar names, like: sotol, huisache, and cenizo. I did recognize the yuccas sprawling across the ground, but that's about it. Except for the chomonque and a few black and red berries, things were pretty drab. It was hard for even me to appreciate the South Texas landscape in late November.

The East Texas Pineywoods were a different story. It felt like home, the foothills of South Carolina. The change from scrubby brush to pine forest was instant. Sweetgum, dogwood, and sassafras grew around the pond. Surrounded by these old friends, I sat on a bench and counted the knees of a bald cypress (18). The cool North breeze that arrived at that moment made this my favorite space and time at SABOT. I sat in this Carolina-like landscape with my thoughts for awhile.



## WATERSAVER LANE: DEMONSTRATION GARDENS



**Top:** Watersaver Lane design  
**Bottom:** View from Overlook  
**Right:** Live Oak, Agave, Abutilon



SABOT's demonstration garden, Watersaver Lane, displays six front yards with different xeriscaping ideas. The exhibit is a collaborative effort with the San Antonio Water System. The designs range from desert to low shrubs to flowering meadow with all the plants being drought tolerant. It was a great example of what locals can do with minimal water (after establishment).



The garden was closing, but my feet brought me back to the Pineywoods pond, where I admired the last of the sun's rays on the tops of the bald cypresses. A horticulturalist informed me that they were closed, I said okay and asked for a ride out. He gave me a scenic tour to the exit in the standard hort cart. Either he is really friendly or he wanted to get me out as surely and quickly as possible so he could go home. Probably both.

## WATERSAVER DESIGN: ENVIRONMENTAL LANDSCAPING

Deciduous trees for seasonal color.

Cacti and succulent for continual interest

Mulch around perennials to conserve water



Light colored roof to reflect sunlight

Leaf modifications for evergreens: hard, waxy, outer coatings.

Porous pathway to allow storm water to soak into the ground

## RETURN TO TEXAS IN SPRING



I will visit SABOT again in the spring, so I can see the Texas bluebonnets, scarlet gillias, and such. The parkway leading to SABOT is naturalized meadow with wildflowers as well. The vernal bloom is supposed to be a spectacular event. We'll see.