

# A Lost Horizon No More

## The Good Earth Revives Shangri' La to a Sanctuary of Peace



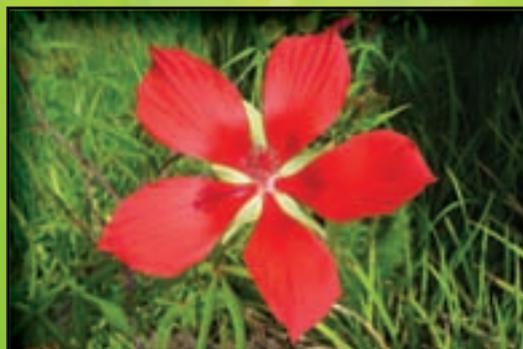
It sat vacant for over 50 years—252 acres of a wooded utopia lush with cypress and tupelo trees clinging to the banks of Adams Bayou interspersed with untamed prairie and wildlife. But today

it lives up to its name and is an enchanting wonderland that is not only a sanctuary of peace but a thriving eco-system that has been lovingly resurrected.

Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center is located in the heart of Orange, Texas, less than a two hour-drive from Clear Lake and surrounding areas. It is a place of discovery and beauty. It is a powerful place, but also a gentle one. It's like falling down the rabbit hole, but unlike Alice, you're not dreaming and there are no mad hatters—just flower gardens, sculptures, birds, exhibits, ponds, a lake, classrooms, and much more. The best part about Shangri La is that it is leaving no carbon footprint in its electrical consumption and is LEED-NC Platinum Certified, making it one of the most earth-friendly projects in the world. A soothing water wall acts as a sound barrier between the gardens and outside road traffic.

Shangri La was owned and originally developed by philanthropist Lutcher Stark, who was adamant about preserving nature. The irony is that he was the only child of a wealthy timber baron. Stark began construction on Shangri La in 1937 and vowed to fire anyone who cut down a single tree. He spent 20 years developing the land until a hurricane and subsequent freeze (1957 and 1958 respectively) caused major damage to the property and the project was abandoned. Stark died in 1965.

In 2002, the Nelda C. and H.J. Lutcher Stark Foundation moved forward to revive the property and turn it into a world-class, earth-friendly garden and nature center for the public's enjoyment. Vowing that Shangri La would become the "greenest project in Texas," LEED certification was sought and eventually obtained, but opening of the gardens did not come without interruptions. In 2005, Hurricane



### BY SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER

Rita roared through and destroyed approximately 55,000 trees. Then, shortly after opening in 2008, Hurricane Ike hit causing more delays. Finally, in the spring of 2009, Shangri La was back in business and has been delighting visitors ever since, thanks to the dedicated staff and volunteers who worked tirelessly to make it happen. Today, it sits in all its glory, and as you enter its gates, expect the unexpected.

Shangri La is made up of three components: the Botanical Gardens, the Nature Center and the Orientation Center. The Botanical Gardens include: Hanging Garden, Color Garden, Contrast Garden, Line Garden, Shape Garden, Texture Garden and the Sculpture Rooms. The Nature Center includes a hands-on exhibit center, laboratory and outdoor classrooms. The Orientation Center includes an exhibit hall, theater, children's garden, greenhouses, café and store.

A map of the area is engraved in a massive piece of marble to the right of the ticket window as is a petrified tree trunk that functions as a fountain. The mile-long pathway will take you on a journey that even Alice would envy. But a quick stop at Discovery Theatre is recommended first to watch an eight-minute film that truly captures the beauty of Shangri La. After the movie, the screen rises and you get your first glimpse of this amazing paradise.

Next, wander over to the bayou and take a ride down swampy Adams Bayou on the electric-powered pontoon boat and get up close and personal with the amazing Bald and Pond Cypress trees. These types of trees have wide bases (buttresses), and are deciduous conifers (needle-leaf) with small round cones and peeling bark. They share the bayou with the broadleaf tupelo trees, which have bell-shaped trunks and resemble oaks. Moss in abundance drips off limbs and hundreds of cypress knees (woody growths) project out of the water like gnomes. Be sure and scope out

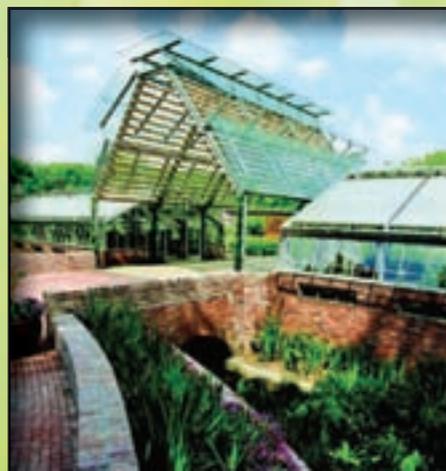
the Giant Salvinia (cluster plants atop the water) and be on the lookout for red-eared sliders (turtles), egrets, spoonbills, herons, woodpeckers, blue tail skinks and reptiles. But the best treat of all is the Survivor Tree, a Pond Cypress that is 1,237 years old. An oddity in that it is not supposed to grow west of the Mississippi.

Back on the trail, you will occasionally walk over the wetlands on ChoiceDek (boardwalks made of recycled plastic and wood fibers). Benches and other items are made from trees felled by Hurricane Rita, the buildings' insulation material is soy-based, carpeting is corn-based and only organic fertilizers are used on plants and gardens. Ten different pest predators are used weekly to allow for natural control of pests. Forty percent of energy at Shangri La is solar powered and a closed-loop geothermal heat exchange system is used for heating and cooling. Water is collected in nine cisterns and used to irrigate vegetation and flush toilets. Roofing materials that possess low emissivity were used during the building process and many structures are shaded so the sun's energy does not reach construction materials. Even the parking lot is made from asphalt that previously coated downtown streets of Orange.

Sixty-foot cypress logs (salvaged from Hurricane Rita) frame the Pond of the Blue Moon which features 41 varieties of azaleas showing off 2,000 blooms by mid March. A 1917 Lord & Burnham Victorian greenhouse is full of colorful orchids and other dazzling epiphytes. The Children's Garden features herbs, butterflies, bottle trees, and vegetables grown in raised rectangular beds that are harvested and donated to soup kitchens. Maxine, a one-winged owl, happily resides on the premises after being rescued from a barbed wire fence. She loves children and is used for educational purposes. Teacher's workshops and a variety of school programs are offered by Shangri La and they are free.

Ruby Lake encompasses 15 acres and is home to more than 5,000 birds (17 species) annually. A state-of-the-art bird blind allows everyone to observe nesting and bird activity without disturbing their natural habitat. Since sustainability is important to the environment, 100 acres in Shangri La were set aside to remain undeveloped.

In closing, Shangri La must be seen to be appreciated as words cannot fully explain its wonderment. It is a true testament to the words of Aristotle: "Nature does nothing uselessly."



## At a Glance:

- Shangri La is a term penned by author James Hilton for his 1933 book "Lost Horizon," depicting a utopian place. The book was made into a movie in 1937
- Shangri La Botanical Gardens & Nature Center is Platinum LEED-NC (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, New Construction) certified. First in Texas and first in the south
- Over 300 plant species in nine formal gardens
- Cypress/tupelo swamp with upland forest
- Nature Discovery Center and laboratory
- Three outdoor classrooms
- Exhibit hall, theater, children's garden, exhibition greenhouses
- Cafe and garden store, gift shop with eco and Fair Trade products
- Approximately mid-March into early-April 2,000 azaleas blooming, along with irises, lilies and more
- April 16-20 Earth Week with booths and activities
- For more information visit their website at [www.shangrilagardens.org](http://www.shangrilagardens.org)

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