

Discovering the Discovery Garden

PICTURE A SHADED slope through a canopy of oaks to a warren of paths and colorful child-height signs. The designers of the Botanic Garden's new Discovery Garden know how to entice children.

My own kids being 20-somethings, I brought my neighbors Emily Condon, age 8, and her 5-year-old brother Tommy to preview the garden before its Grand Opening last



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Saturday. I tested the garden's attention-holding capability by bringing them after a long day of school and after-school sports.

The first exhibit was a tray of leaf litter accompanied by magnifying glasses. They were too antsy for such a still activity, and raced by. But the first "sense" sign — a nose suggesting that they smell pungent yerba buena herb — aroused their curiosity. They

savored a leaf's minty aroma. Now we spotted a junco bird, its flesh-pink beak protruding from a black hood, bathing glamorously in a moss-encircled pool. He was fastidious, dunking and flexing his wings with noisy splashes as we lingered, enthralled.

Having watched the sparrow, they were eager to hunt for animals hidden among native plants in a California meadow mural. Almost nothing, from blue-belly lizards to a great horned owl in a lone oak, escaped their discerning eyes. Then Tommy charged off to a three-tiered food chain model, calling, "Look!" He was more interested in spinning the tiers than matching the animals with prey, predator, and habitat, but Emily paused a little longer.

Overhead, a lifelike acorn woodpecker demonstrated its typical habitat on a stately coast live oak. A sign explained the woodpecker hole-riddled trunk nearby, but the siblings focused on a spider crawling across the sign. "Don't hurt him," warned their mom, Christy. They watched with silent reverence.

The large, text-rich signs attracted the adults, while the kids appreciated the tiny sensory ones. "Eye" signs encouraged inspec-

IF YOU GO

The Discovery Garden Exhibit opened April 28, 2007, and is available whenever the Botanic Garden is open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

tion at a particular sight; "nose" signs tempted the nostrils, and "hand" signs invited a careful touching of a plant or rock.

Tommy was king of discovery, dashing along myriad paths from bird houses to ponds. Emily thought everything was "cool", and was patient enough to watch little scenes unfold. She observed tadpoles and mosquito fish swimming beneath as skimmers swept across the top of ponds.

She adjusted the Anna's Hummingbird calendar to learn what it eats in the spring, and scrutinized a curiously-named horse chestnut tree.

The best part was the garden's seamless transition between artificial models and the real thing. Embedding the exhibit in a natural oak glen, insects and birds have moved in, lending their evocative presence. Children and adults can experience the beauty of California native flora and fauna while discovering important ecological relationships naturally.

Tommy had explored the garden at hyper speed: he was surprised when he realized we'd reached the end. "Is that all?" he asked me. "This area was designed especially for children," I said, "but the whole botanic garden is great for kids."

"I want to see the rest of the garden," he insisted. I knew the Discovery Garden was a winner.

CORRECTION: In the April 17 column about the Channel Islands as "Galapagos of the North," I erroneously assigned the 19th century Woman of San Nicolas Island to the Chumash Indians. She was actually from the Gabrielino tribe. The tragic ending to her sad tale is that when she was eventually brought to the Santa Barbara Mission, she could not communicate with the Chumash. She died very soon afterwards.