LEFT
The plaza of the Church of Santo Domingo is used for festivals.

BOTTOM
A brick aqueduct was uncovered during excavation.

BELOW AND OPPOSITE
The textural quality of plants is highlighted in the garden.
The state of Oaxaca in southern Mexico has an amazing diversity of plant species. The mountainous terrain rises from the Pacific to 14,000 feet, creating extreme geographic fragmentation. The isolated ecologies result in an abundance of native plant species, more diverse than anywhere in North or Central America. This diversity is also reflected in the cultural landscape, where distinct ethnic groups developed in geographical isolation and have retained their language, customs, and traditions today. The mission of the Jardín Ethnobotánico de Oaxaca (Ethnobotanical Garden of Oaxaca) is to illustrate this connection between the land, its plants, and its people.

The garden is a calm oasis on the grounds of the Templo de Santo Domingo de Guzmán, a 16th-century Dominican mission complex. Constructed over 200 years, the church, monastery, and grounds cover 40,000 square feet in the bustling historic city of Oaxaca de Juárez. The complex now hosts a historical library and cultural museum that illustrate the breadth of human experience in Oaxaca. This history is interpreted in the garden through plants, archaeological remnants, and art.

Visitors enter the garden through the northern entry court, where they encounter the work of the artist and philanthropist Francisco Toledo, one of Oaxaca's best-known cultural figures. The stone perimeter wall opens to frame the view of Toledo's sculpture, La Sangre de Mitla (The Blood of Mitla), a weeping wall with...
LEFT
The Blood of Mithra, a freestanding weeping wall by the artist Francisco Toledo, features the gracao, a traditional motif used throughout the garden.

RIGHT AND BELOW
The northern entry court is the formal entrance to the garden. Red-colored water flows in a runoff within the entry patio.
red water flowing over an incised grota, a pre-Columbian hook and ladder form also seen at the nearby archaeological site of Mitla, and a leitmotif of the garden. The water is colored red with grana, the dye extracted from the native cochineal bug, a major source of income for New Spain. Alejandro de Ávila, the director of the Ethnobotanical Garden of Oaxaca, explains, “It’s the blood of Oaxaca, the vitality of Oaxaca, the suffering of Oaxaca under Colonial rule, but also the vitality of an indigenous people.”

The sculpture draws you in to one end of a long, narrow courtyard, where a channel of water leads you forward, passing the only other object in the space: a single, delicate guaje tree (Leucaena diversifolia), from which Oaxaca derives its name. Visitors emerge into the light of the garden through the archways of the enclosed portico. From this high point, the 5.7-acre garden unfolds with the long views over mature trees to the mountains beyond, giving the impression that the garden is old, although it was created in the late 1990s.

After using them for the military for two centuries, the government transferred ownership of Santo Domingo’s Colonial-era buildings to the Federal Institute of History and Anthropology, and the land and remaining buildings to the state, which planned to sell to a development company for a future convention center, luxury hotel, and parking lot. Alarmed, Toledo, de Ávila, and others formed Pro-Oax, an organization dedicated to preservation of...
the environment and the promotion of indigenous culture in Oaxaca. Pro-Oax convinced the state to retain the site as a center of Oaxacan culture, where they envisioned a museum, a library, and an ethnobotanical garden proposed by de Avila. In 1994 the project moved forward with seed money from Toledo and funds from a public-private trust, including Pro-Oax, Fomento Social Banamex, and the federal and state governments.

The group wanted a design that addressed the specific flora, cultural history, and strong tradition of tequio in Oaxaca—a collective work model that stems from pre-Hispanic times. From August to October 1997, a team composed of ethnobotanist de Avila, the architect Claudia López Morales, and the painter Luis Zárate developed the basic design with Toledo providing design review. “From outside Mexico, especially coming from the United States, people are always looking for ‘the name.’ As if it were always the work of one person. This has been collective work. We said, ‘We’re doing tequio!’” explains de Avila.

De Avila’s species list and conceptual plant groupings became the framework for the planting, while Morales provided architectural expertise. The aesthetics of the garden were largely the contribution of Zárate, who said he “tried to communicate poetically with the visitor, to try to give the architecture and layout of the plants a poetical feeling.”

Walking through the garden feels like traveling through a series of carefully composed paintings. The visitor retains images of water rip-
CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE
A water feature by the artist Luis Zárate; the trunk of the floss silk tree; Oaxaca's varied native flora; and native vegetation treated as sculpture.

plunging in the runnel, an archaeological remnant lying beside the path, the majesty of a tree, and texture upon texture of marvelous plants—spiky trunks, small leaves fluttering in the wind, and stiff cacti columns. Plants are sculptural objects seen in the round against a field of stone.

To express the unique qualities of this natural heritage, only local materials are used in the garden. Thirty communities donated earth, rock, and 7,000 plants. Discoveries were made when clearing and excavating the grounds. Ceramic and limestone kilns, bathing areas, laundry basins, and canals now appear throughout the garden like follies, providing glimpses of the daily life of the Dominican monks.

The surface of the garden is rock, not soil, in colors ranging from blue-green to red and white, creating a large-scale mosaic underfoot. Fine decomposed stone paths edged in metal zigzag through the garden and sit above or below the adjacent gravel beds and planting, so that one feels like a visitor in a precious landscape. Slightly arched steel panels eloquently bridge runnels, which slip by and disappear from view, only to emerge again as the experience unfolds.

To conserve plant biodiversity, preserve indigenous plant knowledge, and promote environmental education, the plant collection focuses on those species used by indigenous cultures for utility, spiritual significance, and regional identity. Organized into zones based on use or by
biogeographical region, more than 950 species are represented, which is still only 11 percent of the flora in the state. This abundance of plant types could be overwhelming, but the spare, masterful planting design highlights their architectural qualities. The L-shaped wall of cactus that frames the central reflecting pool has become an iconic, highly photographed image of the garden.

Water, supplied via a 400,000-gallon cistern, is used for hard watering plants and for the water features. The narrow metal-edged runnel flows from one end of the garden to the other, articulating the edge of a terrace, slipping under the plantings, meeting and disappearing from view. The terminus is a sculpture by Zárate, a water-filled greca reflecting the sky in a bed of white stones flanked by two feathery plantings of Equisetum.

Sculptures by prominent Mexican artists are found throughout the garden; all express the greca, whole or abstracted, in metal, wood, stone, and water. Each setting is carefully designed to reinforce the feeling of the piece. A fractured boulder cut by Jorge Yáñez is set in the hot sun, where dark shadows of the cut greca give the voids depth and mystery, while the carved tree trunk of Jorge Dubois’s sculpture is set amid a field of stone with other large trees.

Despite these attractions, this is not a garden that one can linger in. Visitors can enter only through guided tours. Access is controlled due to a small staff, potentially dangerous
areas such as the open deep kilns, and past theft and vandalism. The advantage of limited access is that the garden is not littered with signage; instead, docents tell the story. This garden is not a park. There are few railings and no benches, trash cans, or lighting. It is refreshingly clear of the trappings of modern comfort. The overall feeling is elegant and understated.

Visitation is growing steadily, even with the restrictions on access, partly due to school groups and active outreach into the community. Schools, city government, and community projects receive seeds and plant donations from the garden. The garden propagates native plants designated as high-priority species, those that are threatened, culturally significant, or hardy without much water.

Speaking of the garden's interpretative openness, de Ávila says, "There's so much that stimulates the imagination. You can sense a meaning for yourself. It doesn't have to be concealed into a rather fixed story of hard facts and some authority telling you what it's about. We hope that this will not become a place of a fixed discourse. We hope that people who come here always see beyond that."