

Long's Garden Aviary

by Sheldon Dingle
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You don't need acres of land to have a very nice aviary garden. Indeed, the vast majority of the AFA members keep their birds on an ordinary tract-sized lot of about 50 or 60 ft by 80 or 100 ft. Some members have even developed nice aviary gardens in a condominium environment. We will feature a variety of situations where birds and plants have been put together in a pleasing way. There will be, of course, the occasional estate-sized layout that involves many acres and an heroic investment but mainly we want to show you what can be done with the more common backyard that the majority of us putter around in.

Sel and Aletta Long have a beautiful aviary garden established on a Southern California lot measuring 60 ft by 100 ft. Most of the backyard is given over to aviaries and the surrounding garden. The main aviary complex is 34 ft long by 12 ft wide with its length running parallel to the wall across the back of the property. This aviary is divided down its length so in actuality there are two flights 34 ft long by 6 ft wide. The flight to the front (nearest the house) is well planted and filled with an assortment of finches that are not very destructive to plants. The rear flight is not heavily planted because the Princess of Wales Parakeets keep all growing things gnawed down.

This rear flight extends two feet above the six foot wall on the boundary of the property which is a clever labor and material saving method of construction. Inside this flight is a smaller enclosure that is made of wire with a two inch square mesh. This allows the weavers to have complete run of the flight but prevents the larger and more destructive parrots from getting into the weaver's nesting area. The weavers can fly full speed through the two inch mesh while the Princess of Wales can't squeeze through it under any circumstances.



Construction of the aviary was Sel's task. He and Aletta and everyone else visiting their lovely backyard thoroughly enjoy the sights and sounds.



A view of Long's garden aviary showing the large Silver Maple tree, various species of bromeliads, Boston Ferns, several epiphyllum species, a Chamaedorea Palm, a China Doll plant and the front of the aviary. A small, running stream and waterfall was achieved by tiering the ground and laying down a black sheet of plastic on the highest level. The recycling pump raises water up to the top of a short stack of rocks and falls down to wander among smooth river rocks. The birds love it, as their singing, bathing and constant visits to the water indicates. It was thoughtfully designed so no young birds drown.

Photos by Sheldon Dingle



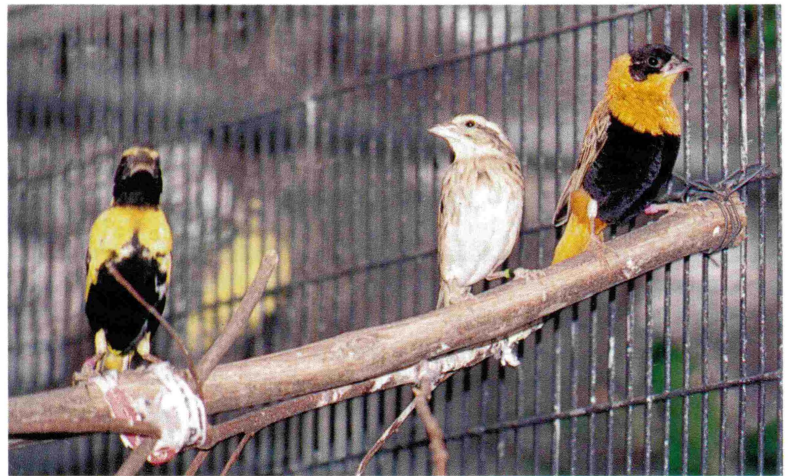
Silver-eared Mesia in Long's planted flight.



An inside view of the planted finch section of the aviary.



This section of the divided aviary houses the psittacines in the collection. Note the section closed off with the two-inch wire mesh. This allows the weavers to use the entire flight but keeps the Princess of Wales Parakeets from entering the weavers' private domain.



The Orange Weavers are molting and look a little ratty but still colorful.



A close-up of a weaver's nest.

The major plant species in this flight is a large dead and dried out tumbleweed. The weavers have started several nests in the tumbleweed and the parrots show no interest at all. The parrots seem interested only in green and growing plants.

The front flight, on the other hand, is well planted and contains a small waterfall and pond. This flight, of course, contains no parrots. The plants are so well grown that they fill the aviary to the point that it is difficult to really see all the birds. The best method to observe these birds is to sit quietly in the shade of the patio and just watch. Under these circumstances the birds seem not to know anyone is about and they carry on their normal affairs. This is a wonderful way to enjoy aviary birds and also a good way to learn a great deal about their behavior.

Some of the larger plants in this flight were planted *before* the aviary wire was stretched across the top. The large plant behind the waterfall is a species of Schefflera, an evergreen shrub or small tree of the tropics that does well in the moderate climate of Southern California. It can also serve as a very nice potted plant to be kept indoors or in a greenhouse in colder climates. Another large plant in the flight is a variety of podocarpus, a good looking evergreen shrub that is widely distributed throughout the Southern Hemisphere with one species found in Asia. Podocarpus are grown outdoors in Florida and Southern California where they make fine specimens and attractive hedges. A well-drained soil with peat or leaf mold is ideal. This plant can withstand an occasional light frost and does well in shade.

Also inside the aviary are several clumps of *Nandina domestica* often called "heavenly bamboo" although it is not a bamboo at all but is in the Barberry family. It is a very graceful plant that can grow to about eight feet and is easy to maintain. With exposure to the sun, the leaves turn various shades of red and are quite colorful. In the shade it remains green.

Much of the ground cover inside the aviary is comprised of air plant also known as spider plant which is usually found in hanging planters. It is called spider plant because long stems hang down from the planters then terminate in a spidery looking clump. It is not often seen on the ground but in this case makes a good cover for the dirt of the aviary floor. Also covering much of the floor is a variety of Korean Grass that

clumps up and can grow very long blades. One of Long's favorite scenes is when a small finch picks up the tip of a blade of this grass then flies off to its nest with the grass in its beak. After flying three or four feet (the length of the blade) the finch hits the end of the rope, so to speak, and gets snapped around and hovers at the end of the tether. Eventually, of course, the finch lets go then perches to ponder this puzzling form of grass. This Korean Grass is recommended for those aviculturists with a sense of humor and dumb finches with strong necks.

Actually, it is completely amazing how many little birds live in peace and plenty in this well planted enclosure. Not all of them can be seen at once. They all find their favorite hiding places and remain out of view much of the time, usually being seen only as they flit from bush to bush or, as occasionally happens, perch on an exposed twig to take a little sun. When one enters the aviary, however, as I did before Long could stop me, and vigorously beats the bushes with a hefty stick, the air explodes into life with hundreds of little blurs swarming about one's head like gnats. The birds suffered no ill effects at all and even Long, once she recovered from a dead faint, was none the worse for wear. And I did learn that the aviary contained Lavender, Shaft-tailed, Green Singers, Nuns, Stars, Strawberries, Cordon Blues, Orange-cheeked and other finches along with some Napoleon and Orange Weavers, a Button Quail or two, Pekin Robins and a few species that were too quick to identify under the circumstances.

Much of the beauty of an aviary garden has to do with the plants that are outside the aviary --- the landscaping, so to speak, that sets off the enclosures. Long's aviary is at the rear of an ordinary sized back yard. It is easily visible from the patio attached to the house. There is a nice lawn between the patio and the aviary and a red brick walkway to and across the front of the aviary. To the right as you look at the birds there is a large Silver Maple Tree that provides shade and has numerous hanging planters in it. These contain several varieties of epiphyllums, often called orchid cactus, which have broad, flat leaves and have large, showy flowers, usually in the spring. The flowers, alas, tend to bloom only at night and to last for one night only. They are, however, well worth watching for and staying up to see. Most of the epiphyllums are epiphytes (living

on trees) in their native habitats of Mexico, Central America and Brazil. Again, these plants are well suited to the Southern California climate and won't take frost or extreme heat. Alongside the epiphyllums are baskets of common Boston Ferns that add a lush touch.

To lend an exotic flavor there are a number of potted bromeliads (another family of epiphytes), the only one of which I could identify was the *Aechmea fasciata*, a plant that has its leaves in the shape of a funnel. Beautiful but weird pink and blue flowers rise on a stalk out of the vase-like funnel. These also are plants from tropical America and won't do well in cold climates.

Other plants that make up the garden include Bella Palms (a *Chamaedorea* species), something called China Doll, an odd ficus or two and several plants Long couldn't identify. Indeed, Aletta Long makes no claim to gardening expertise. Her task is to enjoy it. Sel Long has more the green thumb and enjoys working a bit in the garden but he is a very practical fellow and has the whole garden set up on a drip system of watering that is controlled automatically. When things require enough effort to take the edge off the fun, the regular hired gardener is set to the task. All of the plants were bought at the local nursery at modest cost.

Sel and Aletta Long have kept birds at this location for about 40 years. The birds have been Aletta's passion and Sel has enjoyed them and helped in the building and maintenance chores. They began with Budgies then got Canaries and worked into Cockatiels and several neophema species. This, of course, led to rosellas and mutation Indian Ring-necked Parakeets with the odd Amazon and Grey parrot thrown in. They even kept several species of doves and some Golden Pheasants.

Now, however, as persons of means and leisure, they have pared the collection down to a number of beautiful finches, a few quiet parrots and a couple of favored oddities that fit well into the aviary garden habitat. A number of the species still breed and produce babies each season but there is not that labor-intensive bird farm situation of the past. The Longs have developed a very peaceful, esthetically soothing garden aviary that is a natural pleasure for man and beast alike. This is aviculture at its most refined state. An aviary garden is within reach of all. It is something to strive for. ➤